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FROM OUT THE GLOOM

BY

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CHICAGO

FROM OUT THE GLOOM

CHAPTER I

"MY TITLE IS 'THE SPENDTHRIFT, THE RUINED EARL.'"

The time was noon of a brilliant June day, the place a gloomy office in a London court which belonged to Arley Ransome—a square room that contained tables covered with deeds and papers, iron safes securely fastened, shelves filled with works on the British law and constitution, bill-files that could literally hold no more, maps of different estates lying carelessly open, large inkstands, pens, sheets of blotting-paper. There was a mingled odor of parchment and sealing-wax. The sun, bright as it was, could not manage to shine into the room—the grim, gloomy windows absolutely refused to admit his rays; yet, dark and gloomy as the place appeared, there was a prosperous look about it—an atmosphere of business seemed to pervade it.

Pen in hand, his keen, shrewd face full of deep thought, the owner and occupier, Arley Ransome, sat at the square table, a large parchment deed spread open before him. He was oblivious of everything except the sheet at which he was looking. Drowsy flies hummed and buzzed in the window-panes, and he never heard them; they committed suicide in the great

inkstands, and he never saw them. To the shining sun and the bright summer morning he was equally indifferent. He read on and on, the lines of his face relaxing, until a cold, satirical smile curled his lips. He started as though half-alarmed, when his clerk, opening the door of the room, suddenly announced:

"The Earl of Caraven, sir."

"I am ready to see him," was the reply. But, before the earl entered, the lawyer quickly folded up and put away the deed that had engrossed his attention.

"Am I too soon?" asked a mellow, indolent voice.

Arley Ransome looked up with a smile at the speaker.

"No. my lord; I was expecting you."

"It is something after the fashion in which a spider expects a fly," said the young nobleman. "There is one thing to be said: I am a perfectly resigned fly. I know that evil hours await me, and I am prepared for them."

The clerk placed a chair, and at a signal from his master, quitted the room, but the Earl of Caraven declined the proffered seat. He stood by the mantelpiece, leaning with careless grace upon it.

"It is not the thing to smoke in a lawyer's office," he said, "but I must ask permission to do so. I shall derive some kind of comfort from it."

Arley Ransome bowed, and the Earl of Caraven applied himself to the task of selecting and lighting a cigar.

"I suppose," he said, "that I should furnish an excellent moral as a lesson for all bad boys."

"You would form an excellent warning, my lord," was the grave reply.

"It is the same thing. And now I am prepared for the worst. What is it?"

Arley Ransome looked at the speaker. There was something of admiration, of pity, and of contempt in the long, lingering glance of those shrewd eyes; yet he could not have looked at a comelier face or figure than those of the young earl.

Handsome with a worn, haggard kind of beauty that told its own story—that told of days and nights spent in wild dissipation, told of prodigal habits, of an utter absence of self-control, told of an idle, useless, purposeless life, of a nature spoiled and vitiated—the face might have been a noble one but for the lines that self-indulgence had marked there. The head was well-shaped and proudly set; it was covered with clusters of fair hair, waving in lines of perfect beauty from a broad, white brow. The face itself was clearly cut, with handsome features, dark blue eyes, clear, straight brows; the lips were well shaped, and half hidden by a fair, drooping mustache. The figure was tall, well knit, finely formed, with a certain careless, easy grace. The Earl of Caraven, as he stood awaiting his sentence, was a handsome and comely young Englishman in the springtide of life, retaining much of his natural strength and vigor, although he had done his best to destroy them.

There was no trembling, no hesitation in his manner; his easy grace and *nonchalance* did not desert him even while he listened to words that must have been terrible to him.

"Now, Mr. Ransome," he said, at last, with haughty impatience, "there is no need, figuratively speaking, to keep the ax suspended over my head; tell me the worst at once."

"The worst, my lord, is utter, irretrievable ruin—ruin so complete and so entire that I do not see a chance of saving even one shilling from the wreck."

The earl listened quite calmly; his lips, half-hidden by the fair mustache, grew a trifle paler—but there was no flinching in the handsome, haggard face.

"Utter ruin," he repeated. "Well, as they say in bonnie Scotland, 'you cannot both eat your cake and have it.'"

"True, my lord," assented the lawyer.

"I have eaten my cake," continued the younger man—"and I do not deny that the taste of it is bitter enough in my mouth—it has turned to ashes, like Dead Sea fruit. Still, it is eaten, and there is an end of it."

"It is eaten indeed," said the lawyer.

"You see no loophole—you can suggest nothing?" said the earl.

"Every loophole is closed, my lord," was the brief reply.

"And you are quite sure, Ransome, that there is nothing left on which I can borrow money—nothing more that I can mortgage?"

"I believe honestly that the only object belonging to the Ravensmere estate which remains unmortgaged my lord, is yourself," replied Arley Ransome.

"It is equally sure that no one will lend money on me," said Lord Caraven, laughingly. "Give me—not

the details, but a *resume*; give me some faint idea of how I stand."

Arley Ransome, lawyer and money-lender, the calm, inscrutable man of business, looked at the young earl—perhaps he wondered at his perfect calmness; then he glanced at a sheet of paper lying on the desk.

"It will not be pleasant to hear, Lord Caraven," he said, slowly; "but you ask for it. To begin. At the age of twenty-one you succeeded to the Ravensmere estates and title; the estates were clear of all debts and incumbrances; the rent-roll was thirty thousand per annum; there was beside a sum of fifty thousand pounds in the funds, the savings of the late earl—that is correct, I believe?"

"Quite so," was the curt reply.

"You are now twenty-eight years of age, my lord, and in seven years you have run through a fortune."

"Keep to facts; no comments—plain facts," said the earl.

"The 'plain facts' are these," continued the lawyer—"the fifty thousand went, I believe, to pay the first year's losses on the Derby."

"Yet my horse won," interrupted Lord Caraven.

"The winning of that Derby was your ruin, my lord. After that you continually forestalled your income by borrowing money; then your losses on the turf and the gaming-table were so great that you were compelled to raise a heavy mortgage on the estate; then you borrowed money on the pictures, the plate, and the furniture at Ravensmere. In fact, my lord, briefly told, your situation is this—you are hopelessly, help-

lessly ruined. You owe sixty thousand pounds mortgage money, you owe forty thousand pounds borrowed money—and you have nothing to pay it with. You received notice from me six months since that the mortgage money was called in. Unless it is paid in six weeks from now, the estate—Ravensmere Castle, with all its belongings—passes from you; it will be seized with all it contains."

"And you are quite sure that I can borrow no more?" asked the earl.

"Quite sure, my lord; you have sold all the timber that you could sell; as I told you—the only thing left is yourself."

"Then, unless I repay sixty thousand pounds in six weeks, Ravensmere becomes the property of the man who lent the money?"

"Precisely so," replied Arley Ransome.

"Then I hope he may live to enjoy it, for I have not sixty shillings. Hush!" he continued, seeing that the lawyer was about to speak—"no comments! I am a ruined man, as you say, but I will not submit to criticism; I say frankly, that I have been a wicked spendthrift—a prodigal; I say frankly that, if I could begin life again, I would live differently. I have been worse than a fool, I have been a dupe. It is all over now and I have the price of my folly to pay."

"It is a bitter price, too, my lord. May I ask what you think of doing?"

"You may ask—I know no answer. In six weeks I lose Ravensmere, and with it all sources of income; and, beside that, I am forty thousand pounds in debt,

and I have not forty shillings to pay it with. It seems to me there is but one thing to be done."

Arley Ransome looked up anxiously. "What is that?" he asked.

"I had better invest the trifle I have remaining in the purchase of a revolver—you can imagine for what purpose; it will be but a fitting end to such a career as mine. I really do not think, Ransome, that I have had a hundred thousand pounds worth of pleasure. What comments the newspapers will make upon me! They will head their paragraphs 'Suicide of a Spendthrift Earl'—they will draw excellent morals and warnings from my fate. Men of my age will read it and think what a dupe I must have been: it will not be a noble ending for the last of the Caravens."

"It will not indeed," said Arley Ransome.

"I remember that on the day I came of age I meant to do better than this—Ransome, before heaven, I did. They called me the handsome, the hospitable earl: now my title is the spendthrift, the ruined earl. There is nothing for it but a revolver. I cannot beg, I cannot work, I cannot live without money and luxury and pleasure; without these I must die."

He spoke calmly, as though he were arranging some plan of travel. Arley Ransome looked admiringly at him.

"How this blue blood tells!" thought the lawyer. "Some men would have cried and moaned, would have asked for time and for pity. He faces ruin much as his ancestors faced death on the battle-field." Then seeing the earl's eyes fixed on him, he said, "It is a sorry ending, my lord."

"Yes, a sorry ending for the last of the Caravens. My poor father called me Ulric, after one of our ancestors who saved a king's life by his bravery. I have not been a worthy descendant of that Ulric Caraven who received in his own breast the sword meant for his liege lord. There is nothing for it, Ransome, but the revolver. I have lived like a king, I have spent royally—I have given royally too, but that does not matter; I have done good, as I believed; I have lavished thousands; I have gambled and betted; I have poured out wealth like water under my feet. Now it is over; it has been a short life but a merry one. I could not live in poverty; I could not count shillings and pounds, measure, weigh, and calculate. I loathe the name and thought of poverty. As I have lived so I must die. I deserve no better fate."

Arley Ransome looked at the calm, handsome face.

"You do not seriously mean that you will take your own life, my lord?" he interrogated.

"It seems to be the only thing left for me to take," replied the earl; "I have lost everything else."

"Will you listen to me, Lord Caraven—listen in patience? I have something to say."

The earl laid down his cigar. The lawyer was so earnest, so intent, that he carried the other's weaker will with him.

"I have worked hard all my life," said Arley Ransome—"worked as few men have ever done before—from sunrise to sunset, and often through the long, silent night. I have worked because I love money—because I am ambitious; because I have had an end

in view. You know, my lord, that beside practicing as a lawyer I have been, and am now, a money-lender; it is no news to you that I advanced the mortgage-money on Ravensmere, and that, unless you pay it, the estate becomes mine."

The earl's pale, handsome face flushed hotly. It was hard to picture his grand ancestral home in the plebeian hands of a money-lender.

"There is, as Milton says, 'a lower depth,' and Ravensmere will fall into it," he said.

"It becomes mine," continued Arley Ransome. "The castle, the estate, the plate, the pictures—they are all mine. Now listen, my lord, I have made a fortune; you inherited one, I have made one."

"You might well do so, lending money at a hundred per cent."

"Never mind how it has been made—I have it," said the lawyer; "and my fortune amounts to two hundred thousand pounds."

"Heaven help those by whom you have made it!"

"It has been honestly made. You have gambled, my lord; I have speculated—and my speculations have all turned out well. I have two hundred thousand pounds, and—I have a daughter." His voice sank, as though he were somewhat ashamed of his words; then he continued: "I have made money because I love it; I want to make a position because I am ambitious. Would to heaven that I had a son! I have spent my life toiling in these gloomy offices; hope has brightened them. Would to heaven that I had a son to carry out my dreams, my hopes, my plans!

If I had a son to succeed me, my lord, I would foreclose at once, and make him master of Ravensmere."

"Thank you," interposed Lord Caraven.

"I have a daughter, and she must take the place I would fain have given to my boy. My lord, I make you this offer. You are a ruined man; you tell me there remains for you no hope—nothing but death. Now I will give you life, liberty, wealth. I will make you greater than any of the Earls of Caraven have been yet. I will give my daughter a dowry of two hundred thousand pounds if you will marry her."

Lord Caraven lost his self-possession for one half minute; he literally looked as he felt—bewildered.

"I do not understand," he said, slowly.

"Then I will make my meaning even plainer," returned Arley Ransome. "Make my daughter Countess of Caraven, and I, in return, will make you a rich man."

The earl laughed a little incredulous laugh that made the lawyer's face flush.

"Listen, my lord," he said; "wait before you speak. I am ambitious—I am ambitious for my daughter. Make her Countess of Caraven, and hear what I will do for you. I will first pay the mortgage-money, the sixty thousand pounds; I will clear the estate of all incumbrances, and you shall have your rent-roll free. I will also pay the forty thousand that you owe, leaving you a free man. The rest of the money I shall settle on my daughter for her own use and benefit. Think before you answer me."

"I am not a slave-dealer," was the quiet reply.

"Nor am I, my lord. I am speaking of my daughter, who is no slave."

"Yet you are selling her as a Southern planter might have sold his servant," replied the earl.

"Nothing of the kind, Lord Caraven. I want rank—you want money. Give me rank—I will give you money. It is a fair, honest bargain."

"I have been a spendthrift and a prodigal, but I have not fallen so low as that, Mr. Ransome. I do not think that I shall purchase my life, my safety, my fortune, with a woman's gold."

"It is not a woman's gold; it is mine, my lord," said the lawyer. "Marry my daughter, and you will not have another care in the world. She will be happy, you will be free and wealthy, I shall be content."

"I have known the time," remarked Lord Caraven, when I should have horsewhipped any man who dared to make such a proposition to me. I imagine all fine feeling has become extinct in me. Can you not manage all this for me without asking me to marry your daughter?"

"No," replied the lawyer, quietly. "As I have told you, if I had a son, he should have been master of Ravensmere; failing that, my daughter must be its mistress."

"Not with my consent," said the earl, haughtily.

"Your refusal to marry her makes her more certainly so. If you refuse—if you prefer ruin, disgrace, dishonor, shame, and death, to marrying an innocent girl, whose fortune would set you straight in the world—it is at your own option. If you refuse to make my

daughter Countess of Caraven, in two months' time she will be known over the land as Miss Ransome of Ravensmere—you will have gained nothing by your refusal."

The earl saw it, and for the first time during the interview the calmness of his face and manner was broken.

"I have never seen the girl—I do not know if I could endure her. I tell you, Ransome, this affair of yours outrivals the bids in the slave markets."

'Nonsense, my lord; I have only copied a French custom. All that nonsense about love is but a relic of barbarism. The French are the most civilized of nations. How do they arrange their marriages? Just as I wish to arrange this. Who hears of love before marriage with them? You want money—I offer you a certain sum, with a fair young wife."

"You must know that, although I am a ruined man, there is an immense difference between the Earl of Caraven and the daughter of a money-lender," said the young nobleman. "There can be no happiness in marriage where there is so great an inequality."

"The advantages and the losses are equal," replied Arley. "There are men who, in my place, would not act as I am doing—who would think twice before offering wife and fortune to one—pardon me—so little deserving them."

'You cannot care much for your daughter, to be willing to sacrifice her to a spendthrift," said the earl.

"My lord, each one among us has his price. I want title, rank and position for my daughter. You can

give them to her. You want wealth—she will bring that to you. Will you give me an answer?"

"I should not purchase a picture without looking at it," said the earl. "I cannot promise to marry a lady whom I have never seen."

"You shall see her, my lord—at once, if you will."

The earl looked around him. "Where?" he asked, briefly.

The lawyer's face flushed.

"I do not keep my daughter here, Lord Caraven, among deeds and papers. She is a lady by education, and lives at her own home."

"Where is that?" asked the earl, carelessly.

"At the Hollies, near Kew, my lord. If you please, we will drive down there."

"I do not know—it is not right—I do not care to save myself in such a fashion. Even if I married your daughter, I am quite sure that I should not like her."

"Every one likes Hildred," said Mr. Ransome.

"Hildred! That is a pretty, quaint name," said the earl. "I do not mind going to the Hollies with you, but I shall make no promise. If I should not like your daughter, she would be very miserable."

"As you please, my lord; I shall urge no more. I am determined that my daughter shall marry into the Peerage; my whole heart is set upon it. You are not the only nobleman on my books. I will say no more about it. You will have the money ready for me or give up Ravensmere at the appointed time."

While the lawyer urged him, Lord Caraven had been firm in his refusal. Now that he stood face to

face with bitter, black ruin, shame, and disgrace, with ignominy and death, now that the urgent pleadings ceased, he at once began to waver.

"I will go down to your place with you," he said.

"As you please, my lord," was the cautious answer.

Mr. Ransome began to perceive that the less he said the better it would be for his cause.

"My cab is at the door," continued the earl. "We can go in that."

Without another word they started, Lord Caraven feeling more decidedly ashamed of himself than he had felt yet. It was one thing to be considered the "fastest" man, the greatest spendthrift of the day, and another to purchase his safety by such a marriage as this.

"A money-lender's daughter! I cannot do it," he said to himself more than once. "She is sure to be vulgar; she will have red hair, and will be highly delighted at the idea of being a countess. What should I do with such a wife—I who have worshiped a hundred beautiful women?"

CHAPTER II

"SHE WILL NEVER BE A LOVED WIFE OF MINE"

The Earl of Caraven was on the whole rather surprised when the cab stopped. The Hollies was of far greater extent than he had thought—a pretty villa standing in its own grounds, those same grounds beautifully laid out. On this bright June morning he saw flowers and trees, the silver spray of a fountain, the drooping branches of a grand old cedar; and he owned to himself that it was a far better style of place than he had expected to see. He said so to Mr. Ransome, who answered quietly that he might be as agreeably surprised about his daughter as he had been about his house.

Lord Caraven's face fell.

"Do you know, I had almost forgotten why I was here," he said. "I have the grace left to feel ashamed of myself."

Without another word the lawyer entered the house, the earl following him.

"Where is Miss Ransome?" asked the master of the place. "Say that I want her at once."

Again, when they entered the drawing-room, Lord Caraven was agreeably surprised. Whatever it might be, it was not a vulgar room; there was no new gilding, no tawdry coloring; it was all harmony—a room

filled with soft rose-light and the odor of fragrant flowers—a room that gave one the impression that a lady used it; no vulgar woman, no would-be fine lady, would have given so refined a character to a room.

He was pleased without knowing why. The day was warm and sultry; he was tired, and the fragrance, the silence, the pleasant shade of the room, soothed him.

There was a sound of footsteps. Mr. Ransome rose hurriedly.

"Here is my daughter," he said.

Lord Caraven looked up with some faint gleam of curiosity. He had expected a vulgar school-girl, a pert, affected "miss," who would smile and blush, and exercise all the little arts of coquetry that she had learned at some third-rate boarding-school. He was quite wrong. He saw before him a tall, slender girl, with beautiful dark eyes, and a pale face, a girl graceful and self-possessed, grave and earnest—not beautiful yet, although there was the promise of a magnificent womanhood. No, certainly she was not beautiful; her figure was tall and slender, but it lacked roundness and grace. The hands were beautiful, but the arms were thin; there was something too much of the child, without sufficient of the grace of the woman.

"She is not vulgar, at least," he said to himself, as the grave, dark eyes met his own. "I should really have run away had she been what my fancy painted her—thank heaven she is not. Unformed, shy, inexperienced, half-frightened, what a wife for me—what a mistress for Ravensmere! I have no fault to find with her, but I shall never like her."

So he thought, as in few, brief words the money-lender introduced his client to his daughter. There was nothing awkward in her manner, but she was shy—frightened. She answered the few questions he asked—her voice was sweet and clear, with a true ring about it that he liked—and then relapsed into silence.

Her father asked her for a set of engravings, and, as she crossed the room, Lord Caraven saw that she had a queenly head, crowned with a profusion of beautiful dark hair; she also had a pleasant grace of movement that for an unformed school-girl was rare.

"Is it to be 'Yes' or 'No'?" asked Arley Ransome as his daughter passed for a minute or two out of sight. "You have seen Hildred now—you can judge for yourself; give me your answer."

With a sudden smile—and it was wonderful how that smile changed his face—Lord Caraven turned to his host.

"I really think," he said, "that she is emphatically a nice girl—too nice to be sacrificed."

"It is no sacrifice—she will be happy," replied her father. "Do you say 'Yes' or 'No,' my lord? Time is money to me."

"You give me less time for consideration than you would give to a man buying a picture," he replied. "I see no hope in any other way; if I did, I should refuse. I tell you frankly that I shall never like your daughter; you thrust her upon me, you make her the only plank between my miserable self and the dark waters of death. I shall never like her—first of all, because she is your daughter; secondly, because she is not at all the style of girl that I do admire."

"You are very frank, my lord. Will you answer me one question? Do you love anyone else?"

The young earl looked puzzled.

"The fact is," he said, "that I have loved so many, I really—"

"What I mean is, you are not betrothed—you have never made an offer of marriage to anyone else?"

"I have not had time even to think of marriage—that is why I dislike the idea of it now."

"Then that settles the matter. You say 'Yes,' and I say 'Yes;' Hildred will be willing—girls love position, and she is very proud."

Something akin to pity stirred in the earl's heart.

"What is Miss Ransome's age?" he asked.

"She will soon be eighteen," replied the lawyer.

"And," said Caraven, "so young as that, do you feel no reluctance at giving her to a man who tells you honestly that he will never like her?"

"You will like her well enough in time," replied the lawyer. "Some of the happiest marriages in the world have begun with a little aversion."

"There might be more hope if mine were a little aversion," said Lord Caraven. "It is something worse—it is profound, fatal indifference. Your daughter may be Countess of Caraven, if that be your ambition, but she will never be loved wife of mine. She is not the style of girl that I admire. She is shy, unformed; I like a graceful, lovely, radiant woman—that she never will be."

"She has the clearest sense, the soundest judgment, and the best disposition of anyone I know."

"Possibly," said the earl, carelessly. "Now you know the terms, it remains for you to say 'Yes.' Your daughter shall be Countess of Caraven; she shall go to court; she shall be the leading lady of the county; she will have the family diamonds and all that vain women most desire—but I shall never love her, and, what is more, I shall never even pretend to do so."

Arley Ransome laughed.

"Hildred will do very well without that," he replied. "Then the bargain is struck, my lord. We will say nothing to my daughter to-day; to-morrow I will speak to her myself. Allow me to congratulate you; you are a free man now, Lord Caraven, and a wealthy one."

"I should have been a wiser one had I taken the revolver," he replied; and then Miss Ransome returned with the engravings.

After a few courteous words he went away, leaving Arley Ransome in a state of great delight and elation.

The Earl of Caraven thought more of himself than of the girl. He was ashamed of the bargain, although it was to save himself from ruin and death.

"Every time I look at her," he said to himself, "it will be a perpetual reminder of the most cowardly action of my life. I had rather a respect for myself as a thorough-going spendthrift; I despise myself as being the chief partner in such a sorry bargain. I ask pardon of all the dead and gone Caravens for bringing a money-lender's daughter to Ravensmere."

He was ashamed of himself! He had lived without

restraint; but, as his flatterers said, "his vices were those of a gentleman." He had done nothing that they considered unworthy of one. He had no broken heart, no ruined home, laid to his charge. In his way he had always respected innocence and purity. His faults lay in another direction.

It had been the misfortune of Ulric, Earl of Caraven, to be born in the purple. All the good qualities innate in him had been carefully stifled and stamped out by the most foolish indulgence of parents who called insolence and tyranny high spirits, who considered selfishness clever, who fostered his faults instead of correcting them. He grew up with the idea that the world was made for him—that he by some especial privilege was better than anyone else—that everything and everyone must give way to him. His weak, foolish mother died first; and as she lay dying, some doubt of the wisdom of her behavior evidently came over her, for the last words she whispered to her husband were:

"I am sorely afraid for the boy."

But Ulric's father had no fear; he continued the ruinous system—the child did as he liked, said what he liked, thought what he liked. As for restraint of any kind, it never occurred to his parent to exercise it; the boy was denied nothing that he wished. He grew up to have no thought but of himself.

So, when the old earl died, and he succeeded, he thought the world was at his feet for him to use as he would; his estate was to be burdened and mortgaged to give him money, the tenants were to be dis-

tressed and hard-worked to pay him extra rents. When he discovered that matters were going wrong, he made them worse by engaging an agent, a Mr. Blantyre, who was to oppress more than he himself dared to do. There was no restraint on the earl as a man; he was surrounded by flatterers, by bad companions; he soon became a proficient in all fashionable sins. It was an unfortunate day for him when the turf mania seized him. His flatterers—those who intended to win his money, and who did win it—persuaded him that he was the best judge of horses in England; in reality he knew nothing about them. But when he once began betting his career was a short one. In seven years he was a ruined man; still in the spring of his life, he had run through a noble fortune. In despair at the prospect before him, he placed all his affairs in the hands of Arley Ransome, one of the shrewdest and cleverest men in London. Guided by him in all things, he had gone steadily to ruin; and on this bright June day, when the sunshine bade the whole world be gay, he stood a ruined, hopeless, helpless man.

He was quite serious in saying that he preferred death to life and poverty. He had lived in luxury from the day of his birth; death had less horror for him than the *ennui*, the misery, the loathsomeness of poverty. The day came when he wanted twenty pounds and could not raise it—when Mr. Blantyre threw up his hands, declaring that the estate had been drained to its last farthing. Then the earl, suddenly brought to his senses, wrote to Arley Ransome, asking

him to let him know the exact state of his affairs. The result was his knowledge of inevitable ruin.

Then came Arley Ransome's scheme, the plan that he had brooded over for long years. He was the son of a lawyer who had not succeeded very well in the world, and he had vowed to succeed himself. He had studied the law—he was a keen, clever, shrewd man, but his fortune had been made by money-lending. His practice as a lawyer brought him into contact with moneyed people, also with people who wanted money, and he made the most of his advantages; he had acquired an enormous fortune. His money-lending business was carried on under another name in another part of the city; his plan was to send all his needy clients to this office, and his gains were enormous.

He lived for an object, and it was ambition. To his bitter sorrow he had no son; but he was determined that his daughter should marry one whose position and title should shed their reflected glory on him. To be the father of a countess, to speak of his daughter as the Countess of Caraven, was the height of his ambition—and now it was to be gratified.

CHAPTER III

"IS LOVE A NEEDFUL PART OF MARRIAGE?"

Arley Ransome had decided upon telling his daughter of the future that awaited her. He was not quite sure of her. He had studied law in all its branches, money-making in all its forms; but he had not studied character—his daughter was almost a stranger to him. She had been educated abroad. Her mother died soon after her birth, and he, devoted to business, had not cared to have a child distract his attention. He lived then at his chambers. But when Hildred was seventeen he went over to Germany to see her, and was charmed with her. He found her highly educated, brilliantly accomplished and intelligent, and, in his opinion, she gave great promise of a beautiful womanhood.

She was not a beautiful girl, but she was striking and distinguished-looking. If one entered a room full of people and she was there, her face would strike one first; it would be remembered the longest. It was a face indicative of capability, Spanish in its coloring. Her grandfather was a Spaniard, and something of the spirit of the old cavaliers of Spain had descended to her.

The hopes in which Mr. Ransome had indulged became almost certainties to him when he saw his

daughter. She must marry well, and his ambition must be gratified through her. He had no son. On this dark-eyed girl must devolve the duty of carrying out his schemes.

He smiled at himself as he thought that on his books he had the names of noblemen who would be thankful for a wife with such a fortune as he could give Hildred. He had but to choose among them, and his choice fell upon the Earl of Caraven. His title was the most ancient, his estates were the largest, his ruin was the most complete.

"I could build up one or two more earldoms," thought the ambitious lawyer to himself. "Who says that money is not the prop of the world?"

He decided at once on taking a house in the outskirts of London and installing his daughter as mistress there. It was done at once, and then Mr. Ransome began to put his scheme into action. He knew that the young earl had come to the end of his resources. It would all be plain sailing for him now.

But there was one person he had not taken into account, and that was his daughter. He had never dreamed of anything except blind submission from her. Now he began to ask himself, "Will she object?" She had plenty of character, plenty of spirit, life, activity, energy. Would she submit to his barter and exchange? Would she blush and smile after the fashion of girls who are delighted? Would she be pleased to be a countess, or would she draw herself up in disdain and tell him she was neither to be bought nor sold? He was doubtful as to which it

would be, and he therefore approached the subject with some little hesitation.

That same evening—for it was a rule of Arley Ransome's to do quickly what required doing at all—he told her. He remembered it long years afterward—as did she.

It was a lovely June evening, and the world seemed to be full of music and perfume. The sun had set, and dim, mystical twilight lay over the land, enshrouding the river and the tall green trees; the birds seemed loath to give up singing; now and then a faint sweet song stirred the dewy air. It was one of those evenings on which it seems impossible to believe in anything but what is good, and true, and beautiful, when the dew, and the flowers, and the sunset take our hearts and thoughts to heaven.

Hildred had gone through the grounds down to the banks of the river; she sat there watching the color of the water change as the twilight deepened. A tall beech tree, with superb spreading branches, grew near; the grass was studded with white and golden flowers. There Arley Ransome found her, the daughter on whom he had built all his hopes of fame and fortune, her dark eyes fixed on the tranquil stream, her white hands lying listlessly on her knee.

"Hildred," said Arley Ransome, "I have something very particular to say to you. I will sit down by your side. How gloriously beautiful the river looks to-night!"

Hildred Ransome loved her father—he was the only relative she had except a cousin whom she had never

seen—but it was not with the ordinary love of a girl for her father. She had not quite made up her mind about him. She watched him with keen interest, and the sharp-witted, keen, shrewd lawyer, who could frighten a witness into saying anything he wished him to say, shrank before the dark eyes of his daughter.

She looked up at him now with some little curiosity. What had he to say to her? How was it that the clear gaze of those dark eyes troubled him so greatly?

"Something to say to me?" she repeated, dreamily. "You could not have chosen a better time for saying it, papa. I never care to talk on nights like these. I can only listen."

"The brightest hope of my life has been accomplished to-day, Hildred," he began; "that which I have longed for has been given to me. I have been pleased, proud, and happy."

He saw that her interest was awakened, that her eyes brightened. She looked earnestly at him.

"Pleased, proud, and happy? That seems a great deal, papa."

"It means a great deal, Hildred. To day the Earl of Caraven has asked permission to make you his wife."

He has stretched the point; but of what service would it have been to have studied law if he had to keep to facts?

If he had expected any demonstration of delight he was disappointed. She made none. She did not blush or look pleased or displeased; the calmness of her face was unbroken.

"The Earl of Caraven. That is the gentleman I saw to-day, papa."

"Yes, that was Lord Caraven, and he wishes to make you his wife."

"But how can that be, papa? He has seen me only once. Why should he wish to marry me?"

"That I cannot say, Hildred," he answered; "I am better versed in law than in love; I can only repeat what I have told you. The earl wishes you to be his wife."

The dark, eloquent eyes traveled slowly from his face to the river, and then back to the shrewd, eager countenance.

"And that is the dream of your life, papa—that I marry him?"

"That you marry someone who has title and position to give you," he replied. "Yes, I have built my hopes on it; that is my way to greatness, my ambition realized."

"I liked him very well," she replied, with an air of calm musing; "he is very handsome. But I know little about him."

"Liked him!" repeated Mr. Ransome. "That is a cold word. I can tell you, Hildred, that some of the loveliest women in London would be flattered at receiving attention from him."

"Then why does he not marry one of those lovely women?" she asked, quietly.

"Because he has asked to marry you, Hildred."

She thought for a few moments in silence, and then she said:

"I should be a countess, I suppose, papa. One of the girls from St. Roche, our school, became a countess—everyone envied her; but her marriage was not a very happy one."

"All marriages would be happy if women expected only a little less than they do, and were rational," he said, hastily.

She knitted her fair, white brow, while she thought deeply, silently.

"The Earl of Caraven wants to marry me, papa—did he say that he loved me?"

"Gentlemen seldom speak to lawyers about love," he replied, impatiently. "This is not a mere sentimental, nonsensical love affair; it is of far greater importance. Give it your serious attention, Hildred; put aside all the nonsense."

Again the dark eyes wandered from the rippling river to the blue sky, to the green trees, the soft, dewy grass, the sleeping flowers—wandered uneasily, as though reading something there that did not harmonize with her father's words; then she spoke to him—years afterward she remembered her words.

"That is your dream, papa—to see me Countess of Caraven. Tell me—I have been at school all my life, and I know so little of real life—it seems to me that I have done nothing but study—I have read few novels, I know nothing of what people call love, but you, my father, would not deceive me—tell me, is love a needful part of marriage? Is it right to marry without it? Are people happy without it?"

He made no answer, he could not look into those

dark, eloquent eyes and say what he knew to be false.

"Because," she continued, "in those few novels which I have read, love was the motive, the pivot on which everything else turned; those who married without it were punished, those who had it overcame every obstacle. That was all wrong, then?"

"Novels are only fiction, Hildred; you cannot believe anything in them."

"I thought they were pictures of real life," she rejoined.

"Only ideal pictures; and, as love happens to be a pretty peg on which writers can hang pretty thoughts and words, they make the most of it. In reality it is all nonsense."

Again those dark, earnest eyes were raised to his.

"You assure me of that, papa—that love is nothing but nonsense?"

A moment's fancy, a dream of a beautiful young face, of dark eyes looking into his, of sweet lips he had kissed with a fast beating heart in the moonlight, came to him. He drove the memory away. She was looking at him with expectant face, with parted lips, and anxious eyes.

"I ask you," she continued, "because I say this to myself, papa—if there be no such need for love—if love is only the poet's dream and the novelist's chief resource—why, then I may just as well be Countess of Caraven as anything else."

"Most decidedly," he replied, with an air of relief.

"But," she went on, "if there is a reality of love, if love is needful for happiness, do not let me marry

without it. You are my father, my only friend, I appeal to you."

He asked heaven to pardon him for answering such an appeal falsely. He looked profoundly wise.

"My dear Hildred," he said, "you express yourself so oddly. I believe that the greater part of what you read and hear about love is the greatest nonsense—the happiest marriages are founded on esteem."

"But I do not know enough of Lord Caraven to esteem him," she replied, slowly.

"Some of the happiest marriages," continued the lawyer, "have been when people have learned to love each other after marriage."

"Then love does creep in before or after?" she said.

"Possibly, in many cases. The most sensible way of looking at marriage is this. It is a civil contract between two people who can best make their way in the world by going through life together—for instance, a young farmer marries a girl whose dowry enables him to improve his farm, while her education gives her an interest in it; a nobleman with an impoverished estate and an ancient title marries a city heiress whose grandfather was, perhaps, a soap-boiler."

She was listening in amazement.

"A civil contract!" she said, slowly. "I thought marriage was a religious ceremony, papa?"

"So it is, certainly—most decidedly. I am speaking of it from my point of view."

"Is your point of view the same as other people's, papa?"

"All sensible people have the same ideas on the

subject," he replied; and again his daughter's dark eyes sought the lovely, gleaming river.

"I did not think," continued Hildred, slowly, "that marriage was a contract of any kind. I had a different idea of it. I thought it took place when two souls were attracted insensibly to each other, and life became nobler and better and higher because of their love; and I thought that some love began in time and ended in eternity."

Arley Ransome looked in wonder at his daughter.

"Hildred," he said, "I hope you are not going to turn out romantic."

"I hope not," she replied, quietly. "You have told me the truth, papa, and, though it has astonished me, I thank you for it—one should not have false notions. I have asked because it strikes me that it would be a terrible thing to marry without love, and then for love to come afterward."

The lawyer held up his hands in horror.

"Such a thing could not be. Every woman with a well regulated mind loves her husband; every husband in the same way loves his wife."

"Then, if I marry the Earl of Caraven now," she said, quietly, "I shall learn to love him afterward?"

"Certainly," he replied, with a wish that she were not so earnestly sincere.

"I have not thought of marrying," she continued, in the same earnest, simple tone. "You see, papa, there was nothing to make me think of it. There were no gentlemen at St. Roche, and I have been so busy with my books. I liked study. I like it now. I

like the idea, too, of being a countess—it has a pleasant sound—‘Lady Caraven.’ And you are quite sure, papa, that I shall love my—love Lord Caraven after marriage, if not before?”

“I am quite sure,” he replied, with unnecessary fervor.

Suddenly she looked up at him.

“Papa,” she said, “do you remember the song that I sang to you last night?”

“‘There’s nothing half so sweet in life
As love’s young dream.’”

“I remember it, Hildred. What about it?”

“Why, what does it mean—‘nothing half so sweet in life?’ If I marry the earl, shall I have no ‘love’s young dream?’”

His eyes dropped uneasily from hers. He knew he was deceiving her, and she trusted so entirely in him.

“You ask me the most extraordinary questions,” he replied. “My dear Hildred, do you expect me to extract common sense from novels and poems? I can tell you what will be much more useful to you than talking about love. As Countess of Caraven you will be one of the most popular ladies in London. You will have two magnificent homes—Ravensmere Castle, in Devonshire, a fine old castle, and Holly House, in town. You will have diamonds to wear. You will go to court. You will rank among the peeresses of the realm. You will have wealth, rank, fashion, gayety, influence, all at your command. You will be able to gratify every wish of your heart. The whole world

will flatter you and pay you homage. You will have all that a woman's heart holds most dear."

"Except love—and that is to come afterward," she said.

"Certainly. You seem to think a great deal of this same love too, Hildred?"

"Yes; because I know, papa, that is what some women's hearts hold most dear."

"Quite right. You will find all that kind of thing comes quite right, my dear. Now what is your answer, Hildred?"

She looked round once more in her thoughtful fashion. The faint light gleamed on the river. The faint light was dying in the daffodil sky. The western wind stirred the green boughs; the song of the birds, the ripples of the river, the whisper of the wind, were all repeating the refrain of the song:

"There's nothing half so sweet in life
As love's young dream."

What was it like, this dream that was to come to her—after marriage, not before—this dream that seemed to send poets and novelists mad, since they wrote and sang so much about it—this love for which some considered the world well lost, and which her clear-headed, sensible father said was all nonsense? She would have liked to know something of it. Love's young dream—what did it do to the dreamers? Did it make the world any fairer? She wondered if there were people for whom the dream faded and who married afterward. She was so long silent that the law-

yer became uneasy; there was no telling what answer she might give.

"Your answer, Hildred," he said again.

She turned slowly to him.

"I will marry the earl," she said, simply.

He looked delighted.

"I shall see him and tell him to-morrow," he said.

"Now remember, Hildred, this is a very solemn matter. You cannot go back after you have once pledged your word."

"I shall not want to go back," she said. "It is a fair destiny—why should I wish to change it? Countess of Caraven! When shall I see him—the earl—again, papa?"

Arley Ransome could not suppress a slight pang of reproach. If she expected to find a gallant wooer in the spendthrift earl, she would be wofully disappointed. It would perhaps be best to prepare her.

"Very soon; and I am quite sure that he will be pleased. But, Hildred, I want to say something else to you. Common people have common customs. When Darby goes to woo Joan, he sits with his arm round her waist. Men like"—then he grew confused, remembering that men are alike the world over—"men like the earl woo in a different fashion."

"What is their fashion?" she asked quietly.

"They say little of love—they talk no nonsense—they send princely presents of diamonds and jewels—they prove their love by actions more than by words."

"I see."

Then she added, naively:

"Do you know, papa, I think I should like what you call the Darby-and-Joan fashion best."

Her simplicity appalled him, remembering what the earl had said—that he would do his best to make her happy, but that he should never like her. Arley Ransome began to wonder how it would end.

"Are there no Darbies and Joans in high life, papa?" she asked.

"My dear Hildred, high rank has great responsibilities. Men like Lord Caraven have something more to think of than love—that is very well for school-girls and beardless cornets. Try to forget it, and think of the brilliant future that awaits you as Lady Caraven. You will be a beautiful woman, Hildred, and I shall see my hopes realized in you. Then I may tell the earl it is all settled?"

"Will he not say anything to me himself?" she asked.

Now that she had promised to marry him, she began to recall his face.

It was very handsome—indolently handsome; she thought it would be pleasant to see those blue eyes of his warm and brighten, to see the handsome face grow earnest and eloquent; beside, she would like to hear what he had to say. Her heart beat faster as she thought of it. Of course he would not call her "Honored Miss," and kneel down, as the heroes in old-fashioned stories did; but he would talk to her—he would tell her why from the whole world of women he had chosen her. Sweet words would have a pleasant sound coming from him.

"He will speak to me himself?" she repeated, plaintively.

"Of course—later on—not just now, perhaps; he is not a bold wooer, your handsome earl, Hildred. You are sure to think him reserved and cold; in time all that will wear away. I may tell him to-morrow that you accept his offer?"

"Yes," she replied.

And then to her surprise, her father, who was one of the most undemonstrative of men, bent down and kissed her.

"You have made me very happy," he said.

"Why, papa, one would think you wanted this marriage!" she cried. "You seem very anxious about it."

"It is my hope realized, Hildred," he said, gravely. "I am very happy."

Then he rose and left her seated by the river-side.

"Lady Caraven—Hildred, Lady Caraven!"

She repeated the words to herself; they had a pleasant sound, and it was pleasant to think that she would be a countess—pleasant to remember that the handsome young earl had sought her in marriage. How little she had dreamed of this when she sat down by the river-side an hour before!

He would come to see her on the morrow, there was no doubt. What would it be like—this brilliant life in which gayety, fashion, love, and happiness were all to have their part? The light had died in the western skies, the birds had sung their last song, the flowers were all asleep, but it seemed to Hildred Ransome that she would never sleep again; the restless,

beating heart was stirred for the first time from its passionless rest. It was fancy, of course—all fancy—but the long, low wash of the waves certainly sang "Love's Young Dream." It must be fancy, but the wind did whisper it:

"There's nothing half so sweet in life."

"I will go in," thought Hildred, "and sing something that will take the sound of those words from me."

It so happened that the first sheet of music she took up was Mrs. Jameson's pathetic ballad, set to sweet, sad music:

"I have had joy and sorrow, I have proved
What life could give—have loved and been beloved;
I am sick and heartsore
And weary—let me sleep;
But deep—deep—
Never to waken more!"

The words struck her with new meaning. "Have loved and been beloved;" it was like Thekla's song:

"I have tasted the highest bliss;
I have loved and have been beloved.

This was not in accordance with her father's assurance that love was all nonsense.

But she had forgotten that these were poets writing according to their lights—only poets, and not to be believed. It was perhaps a pity after all, she thought, that they—these sweet singers—should teach people to estimate things so falsely—should try to place love above everything else—above wealth, fame, rank, title, gold—when her father, a shrewd, clever man,

assured her that it was but nonsense—that people were better and happier without it.

She felt very wise, very superior to these poets. Life had higher things than love, she said to herself. It was very well in its way. She, for one, was quite content not to know it. Life held duties—noble duties, noble work. What was love but recreation? It was very well for school-girls to talk of in whispers, or for poets to write sweet, sad rhymes about; but for men and women— Her father, perhaps, was right—it was better to be without it.

When this lover of hers came on the morrow, would he mention love to her, or what would he talk about? She sighed as she rose from the piano, flattering herself that she had sung all sentiment away—sighed with a sweet, half-sad longing.

And then, after all her trouble—after singing to drive the words away—after moralizing and trying to make herself a stoical philosopher at eighteen—she found herself, as she went to her room, singing:

"Oh, there's nothing half so sweet in life
As love's young dream!"

CHAPTER IV

"ARE YOU ASKING ME TO DECIDE AS TO MY WEDDING-DAY"

Hildred Ransome was engaged to be married, she was to be Lady Caraven, and on this day her lover was to visit her.

Arley Ransome went off to business early. The first thing he did was to send a note to the earl, saying that all difficulty was removed; his daughter had consented. The only thing remaining was for him to ask her to settle the wedding-day.

Lord Caraven read it through, then crushed it in his hands, and finally tore it into shreds and threw it under his feet. He had not brought himself to a proper state of submission yet. He would have given the whole world to escape from Arley Ransome; but the choice was plain enough—ruin, shame, and despair, or marriage with the dark-eyed girl who was "not his style," and whom he was quite sure he should never like.

Then his thoughts veered round a little. It would be pleasant to restore Ravensmere Castle to its old prestige—it would be pleasant to pay his debts, to feel the load of care and anxiety removed from him—it would be pleasant to take his place in the world again. As for the price, he must pay it. If Arley Ransome would not save him upon any other condi-

tions, he must marry his daughter. If the father was content to give his child to one who honestly owned he did not like her, surely he need not pity her. Surely, again, if she were willing to marry a man whom she had seen only once, she herself deserved no pity.

The marriage should take place in due course. The Ransomes had, as it were, drawn him—nay, forced him into it; the consequences must recoil on themselves. In his own mind he considered the daughter quite as bad as the father—indeed he made little distinction between them. The union was to be; there was no further need for scruple. They wanted his title; he wanted their money. He would be civil to them; they could not expect more.

On that evening Hildred Ransome received a letter and a ring. The envelope bore a crest, and she knew at once that it was from Lord Caraven. The contents were short, but to the purpose; it was not a love-letter, for there was no semblance of love in it.

"MY DEAR MISS RANSOME— I have to thank you for your consent to my"—then came a word that had been carefully obliterated and "wishes" written over it—"With your permission I will call to-morrow. I have sent you an engagement ring—will you wear it? I am yours"—here there was an illegible word.

"ULRIC CARAVEN."

She laid the letter down with a sigh and a smile. She had fancied that a love-letter would be very different. She opened the little parcel that accompanied the note; it contained a magnificent diamond ring—

her engagement ring. She placed it on her finger, and the sun falling on it made it shine like fire. Still, as she looked at it, her eyes filled with tears. She would have liked someone to put the ring on her finger; although she was engaged to be married, and was to be a countess, she felt very lonely and desolate.

Arley Ransome smiled when he saw the ring. At least it was an earnest of good things to come.

"Very nice, very appropriate," said the lawyer—"really a ring suitable for the coming Lady Caraven."

The day after brought Lord Caraven himself.

That interview was something to be remembered. Mr. Ransome, hoping to make matters smooth and pleasant, had invited his future son-in-law to dine with him, and that he might not feel dull had asked the humorous and brilliant talker, Mr. Carway, to join them.

It was well that he had done so, for the actual presence of her lover seemed to strike Hildred dumb. She looked at him whenever she found that he was looking elsewhere. She thought him very handsome. His indolent, careless grace contrasted so favorably with her father's sharp, brisk manner. She wondered why the earl looked worn and haggard. He was only twenty-seven, her father said. She wondered, too, why he was not more *empresse* in his manner. He took her down to dinner, and the only words they exchanged were about the warmth of the day. During dinner they never spoke, save for the most ordinary civilities. When dinner was over, the earl evidently preferred the society of Mr. Carway to hers.

"Why had he asked to marry her if he did not care to talk to her?" she said to herself. "How strange it was!" Then her father invited Mr. Carway to have a game at chess, and the earl walked slowly across the room to where she was sitting. He stood by her side, tall, stately, despite his indolent grace of manner. Her heart beat. What was he going to say? He bent his head somewhat stiffly.

"I have to thank you, Miss Ransome," he said, "for honoring me by wearing my ring."

She looked up at him, and there was something in the calm gaze of the pure eyes before which he shrank as her father had done.

"You wished me to wear it, did you not?" she asked. "My father thought so."

"Certainly. I am delighted."

Try as he would, he could not conceal a touch of irony. She detected it, and looked at him again. He bowed and continued:

"I am fortunate, indeed. I have to ask you, Miss Ransome, now that you have consented to—to become Lady Caraven, to tell me when—that is to say—what day will suit you."

"Day for what?" she asked, innocently.

"A day to be married on," he replied.

A look of rebuke stole over the girlish face.

"You spoke of it so lightly," she said, "that I fancied you meant a day for going out somewhere. You spoke as if you were asking me to arrange a day for boating on the river."

"What shall I say, then?" he asked, smiling despite his annoyance.

"It is not for me to tell you," she replied, in all simplicity.

He laughed aloud.

"Shall I say, 'Loveliest, fairest?'"

With an air of grave displeasure she rose from her seat.

"Lord Caraven, I will hear no more," she said, "your manner does not please me."

He longed to retort, "Nor do you please me;" but he was merely a fly in the spider's web—he could not escape. He followed her. After all, he was a gentleman, and she was to bear his name.

"I am unfortunate, Miss Ransome," he said, "in having displeased you—pardon me. I had every intention of asking you the question with all due decorum—pray permit me to repeat it."

She was still so much of a child that she was puzzled what to answer. Her manner rather puzzled him, too—it was so calm, so self-possessed. There was not the faintest flush on her face, no light in the grave, beautiful eyes, no latent smile—there were no little airs and graces such as surely belong to a young countess-elect.

"Do I understand you rightly?" said the grave, sweet, girlish voice. "Are you asking me to decide as to my wedding-day?"

"I am, indeed, so brave," he replied.

"Then I must decline to do so—my father will know best what time will suit him."

"I understood from Mr. Ransome that six weeks from now would be convenient," said the earl.

Her face did not change—no flush or pallor told that the words had affected her.

"Six weeks," she said, musingly; "I shall be eighteen in four weeks from to-day."

"I wish," he remarked, "that I could be eighteen over again."

"Would you be the better for it?" she asked, curiously.

"I should at least be wiser," he answered; and she made no comment.

"You will speak, then, to Mr. Ransome?" he continued, after moodily reflecting upon all he had lost.

"I speak to my father," exclaimed Hildred. "No. I am ignorant enough of the world, but surely that should be done by you."

She went away then under the pretext of seeking something, leaving Lord Caraven alone.

"She has a little more spirit than I thought she had," he said to himself.

Then, when he had the opportunity, he told Arley Ransome that he had been unfortunate in his interview with his daughter. Mr. Ransome quickly made everything smooth—the wedding-day was to be on the third of August.

"Something may happen before then," the earl thought; "if not, I have always one resource, always one haven. Much may happen before the third of August."

While Hildred Ransome said to herself that, if she liked her future husband no better in six weeks' time than she did now, it would be but a sorry wedding-day.

CHAPTER V

"YOU WILL BE ONE OF THE HAPPIEST WOMEN IN THE
WORLD"

Hildred Ransome did not feel particularly pleased when she came to think about her interview with Lord Caraven. True, she had not expected anything, and therefore she had no right to resent the total want of interest and affection. The thought of refusing him or rebelling in any way against her fate had not yet occurred to her. She had been so completely drilled into obedience and accustomed to obey those in command over her, so used to accepting directions without inquiring as to their merits, that she never dreamed of refusing her consent to the marriage. Asked it had been, she knew, but it was a matter of form; there was no real honesty in the asking. She knew her father's will to be of iron, and she could not resist it. Her lot in life was settled. She was to marry the Earl of Caraven.

She told herself over and over again that she need feel no surprise at his strange wooing. His ways were not as her ways. Her father had told her that she must not expect such wooing as Darby and Joan indulged in, and that love was to come afterward—after marriage instead of before it.

"Rank has its privileges—it also has its penalties,"

said Arley Ransome, often enough for his daughter to remember the words. One of these penalties was undemonstrativeness as regarded love.

She was to be married on the third of August. There was not much time to spend in preparations. Her father had said no expense was to be spared. He took her himself to the court milliner and left the *trousseau* entirely in that lady's hands. Hildred was frightened as order after order was given without the least thought of expense.

"Papa," she said, as they drove home, "do you know that what you have ordered will cost hundreds of pounds?"

Arley Ransome laughed and rubbed his hands.

"I should not care if it cost thousands, Hildred," he replied.

"I did not know you had so much money," she said, slowly; and again the lawyer laughed—laughed as he remembered how wealthy he was, and how little his daughter guessed that it was for that very wealth she was to be married.

She was young enough—only eighteen—to enjoy the magnificent *trousseau* as box after box came home, to linger with admiring eyes over the beautiful dresses—the rich silks, the costly laces, the fine velvets—before the thousand and one elegancies provided for her. It seemed wonderful to her that she should possess all these. She had never thought of her father as a rich man. He was a lawyer, she knew—she knew also that he had something to do with finance; but that he was wealthy enough to spend all that he had

spent on her she had never guessed. She was young enough and woman enough to feel a keen delight in the magnificent *trousseau*, to feel a keen pleasure in the idea that she was to be a countess, wife of the handsome young earl.

One day, Arley Ransome showed her a paragraph in the *Fashionable Chronicle*. It stated that a marriage was on the *tapis* between the Right. Honorable, the Earl of Caraven, and Miss Ransome, the only daughter and heiress of Arley Ransome, Esq. The girl laughed as she read it—a sweet, happy laugh.

"Heiress! I wonder what that means, papa? Why do they call me heiress?"

"I should imagine that they think I have made a little money and that it will all come to you," he replied.

Since he had made closer study of his daughter's character, he had thought it well to keep her in ignorance of the fact that she was a wealthy heiress; otherwise it might occur to her why she was about to be married.

"How do the newspaper people know?" she asked again, after thinking for a few minutes.

"I should imagine that the earl himself has wished the intelligence to be known," he replied, and again Arley Ransome smiled as he fancied how many anxious creditors would be consoled by reading the news.

The earl was attentive. He seldom went to the Hollies; but he sent tickets for the opera, for the theaters—he sent bouquets of flowers, books, and, above all, jewels. Arley Ransome said and thought

that flowers were very well in their way, but that jewels meant more. The earl appeared but rarely himself. When he did go it was to dine, and Mr. Ransome was careful always to find another guest on whom the burden of conversation should fall, so that the visits were not very dull ones.

One morning a parcel reached the Hollies from Lord Caraven, and when Hildred unfastened it, it was found to contain a suite of jewels—pure, pale pearls.

Mr. Ransome cried out in admiration that they were the most beautiful he had ever seen. Hildred sighed as she laid them down in the soft velvet cases.

"Sighing, with such a gift as that in your hands, Hildred?" he said.

"Papa, I cannot help wishing," she replied, "that Lord Caraven would give me fewer jewels, but come oftener to see me. I am to be married in ten days from now, and, do you know, he seems like a stranger to me."

The words touched him a little. He had not much heart, this ambitious man; he would have sacrificed everything he had for his own social advancement; he loved his daughter after his own fashion—she was a stepping-stone to gratify his ambition—but he would have broken her heart over and over again to accomplish his wishes. Still the words touched him, and on the day following, when he met Lord Caraven for the signing of business papers, he said to him:

"My daughter would be pleased to see you. She thinks it strange that you do not call oftener."

They were mild words, but the earl knew he was

under the harrow—he must go. He went the next day and found Hildred at home and alone. He hesitated when he heard that she was alone; he had not wished for a *tete-a-tete*. What was he to say to her? He could not feign love-making; he did not like her. He had always admired fair women with golden hair; this girl had hair as dark as night and a Spanish face. He was compelled to marry her, but he had not an idea as to what he should say to her.

He was shown into the pretty drawing-room where Hildred was reading Goethe. She looked up when he was announced, and placed her book on the table. She bowed coldly, not knowing what to say. She had wished him to call, but she felt, now that he was really there, uncertain how to entertain him. Had he been an ordinary friend of her father's, she would have sought for and found some topic of conversation that interested him. She looked into the earl's handsome face, and, remembering that in ten days she was to become his wife, she was silent. Looking at her, he remembered the same, and turned away with a sigh of despair.

"How dark her hair and eyes are!" he thought to himself. "If I purchase a picture I can surely please myself about its coloring; in taking a wife I have not even that option."

"I have not interrupted you I hope, Miss Ransome?" he said. "You were reading—may I ask what?"

She held the book out for him to see.

"German!" he cried. "Do you read German?"

"Yes and speak it. I like it," she replied; "I like

German literature, after English, better than any."

"Better than French?" he asked.

"Yes, much better," she replied—"English first, German next."

"I thought all ladies preferred French to German," he said, "because it is lighter and more graceful."

"Do all ladies prefer the light and graceful?" she asked.

"Do they not, Miss Ransome?" he replied.

"Nay," said Hildred, "it seems to me that we asked each other questions without waiting for the replies."

"I have never learned German," he said, absently.

"Then you will never make an ambassador or a diplomatist," she remarked quietly; "they require to know many languages."

He looked at her, wondering at her words.

"I have no particular wish to be either," he said.

"Have you not? I wonder at that. If I had been a man of position, I should have liked to be an ambassador. I like any occupation, any employment that exercises one's brains, and I always imagine diplomatists to be accomplished men."

"And you admire accomplished men, Miss Ransome? I think you must admit one thing—diplomatists are seldom sincere or truthful men."

"Insincerity and untruth are not confined to them," she replied; and Lord Caraven began to think that perhaps she was fond of argument.

He talked to her about Goethe, but not with her enthusiasm—he could not even understand it. He was fairly startled at last, when, raising her dark, lovely eyes to his face, she said:

"You give me the impression of having been asleep the greater part of your life."

He was startled, but he answered: "On the contrary, I have been remarkably wide awake—I am past the age of enthusiasm."

"It is better to die at once than to outlive enthusiasm," she said, calmly. "I call it the salt of life."

He remained talking to her for half an hour. They were to be married in ten days, yet he said no word of love. He did not mention their marriage or even allude to it ever so distantly. He might have been the merest stranger, the most unconcerned of guests. He took his leave, and even then he did not offer to touch the hand that she half held out to him.

It was very strange. When he was gone she took up her book, but she could not read. This man who had been talking to her with such indifference, who had spent one solitary half hour with her, and had evidently felt it to be a dull one—this man who had not paid her the least compliment, who had not even touched her hand—was in ten days' time to be her husband, the arbiter of her destiny, the master of her life.

How strange it was! He had asked her to marry him, yet he did not mention the word "love." Did he love her? Was this nonchalant, indifferent style of wooing fashionable? Would he ever talk of love to her at all? Why were her thoughts always running on that one word "love?"

She was restless, anxious, not unhappy, but puzzled. In ten days' time she would be a wife—she would

enter the realm that poets call fairyland. Oh, if this were all, love was a cheat, a delusion, a snare—there was nothing in it! It was supposed to confer such unbounded happiness, and she was not happier—not even so happy as when she studied German at St. Roche.

"But," she mused, "I am forgetting; I always forget. The love in my case is to come after marriage, not before."

She liked Lord Caraven's face; to her girlish fancy it was even beautiful. She wished to see it brighten. It seemed to her like a veiled picture. Then, half shyly, she wondered if he liked hers; though, to be sure, he must have liked it, she thought, or he would not have wished to marry her.

She went quietly to the glass and looked at her face. There was a promise of magnificent beauty in it, but the promise was not yet fulfilled. Nothing could have been lovelier than the dark, starry eyes and the dark, waving hair; but the face was one which lingered where womanhood and childhood meet. Hildred felt no great elation as she looked upon it.

"I shall not be a beautiful countess after all," she said; "and beauty, they say, keeps the heart that love wins."

A book was lying on the drawing-room table—one among many others that Arley Ransome had sent home. She opened it mechanically. The first line she read struck her. It was only a simple poem, written by a great master of poetry, but to her it seemed instinct with sorrow and love:

"Then I took a pencil and wrote
On the mossy stone as I lay—
'Here lies the body of Ellen Adair,
And the heart of Edward Gray.'"

Over and over again she read the words, so sweet and simple and sad. Of course they were lovers and they had quarreled; his heart lay buried with her. That was love.

After all, there was some strange, sweet, mad witchery in this love. She was going to be a countess; she was to have jewels and money, pleasure and fame; yet a conviction came upon her that it would have been better to be Ellen Adair, to sleep in a grave on the windy hill and be so dearly loved, than to be a countess. Who cared for her as this lover Edward Gray cared for his dead love?

"If I died to-morrow," she cried, with sudden passion, "who would grieve except my father, whose heart would be buried in my grave? Not Lord Caraven. If he heard I was dead, he would look up calmly and say, 'Dead, is she? I thought her a strange kind of girl.' Then his life would go on as though I had never been. I should like—ah, me! I hope it is not wicked—but I should have liked someone to love me like the lover in the song! Perhaps love will come, but I should like it best now."

"Papa," she said that evening, as she stood watching the sunset, "we have but one life—that seems to me a sad pity. If we could live once to gain experience, and live again to use it—I should like that."

"My dear Hildred," said the man of law, "it is simply incomprehensible to me how I came to have

such an imaginative daughter. If I had cultivated my imagination, I do not know where we should be now. What were you going to say?"

She was standing watching the sunset; the great boughs of the cedar drooped near her; her young face, raised with its dreamy, wondering expression to the skies, might have touched a harder heart than his.

"We have but one life," she said, "and if it be all spoiled there is no remedy. Papa," she cried, with sudden passion, "do not let me spoil mine—do not deceive me—do not let me marry without love, if love be needful for happiness. I should like to be loved, papa. Listen to me—I do not really care to be a countess—I could be happy without that—I could be happy without much money or without jewels, but I begin to fear that I shall never be really happy without love. I think women value love more than men. Do you think I can be happy without it?"

He never forgot the pleading expression of her face. It touched him so that he half hesitated as to whether he should sacrifice her to his ambition or save her—save her, and let her live her womanly life of love. But the hesitation passed as quickly as it came. What did it matter? Love marriages, as they were called, often ended in disgust.

She went close up to him and laid her hand on his shoulder; her dark, bright eyes seemed to look through his into the very depths of his soul.

"Now, papa," she said, "we are quite alone here, you and I—only the silent stars are our witnesses—now tell me, in the presence of heaven, can I be happy without love?"

He was silent for one minute. It was hard to deceive her, but there was no help for it. He took her hand in his.

"I prophesy for you, Hildred," he said, "that you will be one of the happiest women in the world."

"Then I am content. You would not deceive me," she replied.

And, turning away from him, she re-entered the house.

It must be right; her father would not deceive her—would not let her do that which would wreck her whole life. It was she herself who had been mistaken—she who had dreamed that life had more of sweetness and of poesy than it really possessed.

* * * * *

The ten days had come to an end. How time had passed so quickly Hildred Ransome could not tell. The preparations for her marriage were complete. There was a slight dispute between the earl and the lawyer. Lord Caraven wished to have the ceremony performed quietly and away from London—Arley Ransome insisted that the marriage should take place at St. George's, Hanover Square.

"And so, my lord," he said, "let us distinctly understand each other. My daughter is bringing you a fortune that might be the dower of a princess, and she must be treated with due respect. I will not have one detail omitted. The marriage must be conducted as though you were espousing a lady of your own rank."

Lord Caraven laughed; he knew that there was no opposing such a decree—it must be complied with. He made the best of it. He invited his half-cousin, the Lady Frances Riche, a superannuated coquette, who still believed herself young and charming, to be bridesmaid. Lord St. Maure was “best man.” A small but select party of guests were invited. Nothing was omitted.

For many days past the great world had been on the *qui vive* about the marriage. The wedding-dress had been shown at the court milliner’s, the jewels could be seen at Messrs. Burford’s. All fashionable London discussed the union, and all fashionable London knew what the girl herself did not know—that she was being married for her money, that her marriage was as much a matter of sale and barter as though she had stood in a slave market with an auctioneer by her side.

Yet no one thought it wrong; an impoverished earl with a grand old title and a bankrupt estate—there was nothing for him but to marry money, and Hildred Ransome, the lawyer’s daughter, had plenty. There was not one of all the men and women who read about the marriage, heard of it, or discussed it, who would have dreamed of interfering—no one to say: “Have pity on her youth and her ignorance; think before you sacrifice her young, sweet life, her chance of happiness.” There was no one to plead or to pray for her; on the contrary, the fair women of the world looked on her with envy. It was not every heiress who could purchase a coronet like that of Caraven.

Her father thought her a most fortunate girl, and did not scruple to tell her so.

She herself could not analyze her own feelings. She was living quietly with her father in a river-side villa; a little later on she would be Countess of Caraven, one of the stars of the fashionable world. At present she was, as it were, on the threshold of existence: in a little while a glowing, luxurious future would be before her.

"You must have a clever maid, Hildred," said Arley Ransome. "Ask Lady Riche to find you one."

Lady Riche succeeded, and Hildred rejoiced in the attendance of a bright, quick *Parisienne*, who foretold that the day would come when her mistress would be acknowledged one of the most beautiful women in England.

"She wants a little training; she will have to travel and mix in society—then you will see," reported Amiee. "I have never seen a face or figure of greater promise."

The day before Hildred's wedding-day the Hollies had been one scene of excitement and confusion; there had been so many visitors, the number of presents were so great. Late in the evening a magnificent bridal bouquet arrived from Lord Caraven. The wedding-breakfast was all prepared, the trunks containing all that was needed of the grand *trousseau* were packed and corded—the labels were already addressed, "Lady Caraven, passenger to Paris," for the earl had decided on spending the so-called honeymoon there; every detail of the morrow's ceremony was arranged,

and late at night Hildred Ransome stood with the earl's bouquet in her hand.

They revealed nothing to her, those odorous flowers; they were of magical sweetness, but they brought her no message. There was something pathetic in the picture—the drawing-room full of strange shadows, the light of the lamp falling where she stood, a contrast to the darkness around. She wore a dressing-gown of white, soft, clinging material, fastened with crimson cords, her wealth of dark hair lay negligently over her shoulders, her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

It was a sweet, sad, girlish face; a motherly woman looking at it would have drawn the girl's head down on her breast, and have soothed her with loving words. The morrow would be her wedding-day; the tired servants were all sleeping, her attentive little maid had gone to rest, her father had retired quite early to his room. The morrow would be her wedding-day, and they had told her that she could live without love. Her wedding-day! No laughing young sisters came to talk over the great event with her; no gentle, loving mother folded her in her arms, and prayed heaven to bless her in her new life; no laughing, bright, fond school friends were there as companions; she was quite alone, her heart aching and burning with a new sense of desolation and loneliness. Her wedding-day! Her toilet-table was laden with jewels; her *fiancé* had been lavish in his presents; no duchess had more elegant or costly surroundings—yet she would have given all, she thought, for someone to love and com-

fort her. Her wedding-day! Yet he had not been, he had sent no note with the flowers, only his card and his compliments; there was no promise of the love that was to come after marriage, not one kindly word to allay her doubts or her fears. There could be no picture more touching than this of the lonely girl with the flowers in her hand. She had turned to them as she would have turned to a living creature; her lover, who on the morrow was to be her husband, had not been near, but he had sent the flowers, and in her forlorn fashion she had fancied she should get some comfort from them.

But they revealed nothing to her. The costly blossoms lay cold, fragrant, without meaning. As she stood holding them there came into her mind a story she had read of a young girl on her wedding-eve—a girl who had stolen out in the sweet, soft starlight to meet her lover by the garden-gate. She remembered that the story told how the gallant young lover had kissed his bride—kissed her lips and her hands, calling her by every sweet name a lover could invent—how they had stood under the starlight among the trees and the flowers, how full of hope and happiness the young lover went away, and was never seen again.

She thought of this story now. Her face flushed; her heart beat. She dreamed how she would have liked to steal out under the stars and hear her handsome lover whisper sweet words to her.

She was desolate and lonely. The stars were shining, the wind was whispering low—but no lover was near. She held the flowers to her face.

"Tell me, pretty blossoms," she said, "have you no message from him? None? Then, if in all this world one sentiment is more false than another, it must surely be this:

"'There's nothing half so sweet in life
As love's young dream.'"

CHAPTER VI

"SOME PEOPLE ARE NEVER SATISFIED"

Hildred Ransome did not seem to understand either the day or the event until she stood before the altar of St. George's Church. Then, with a cold shock and a cold, dull pain, the full realization of it all came to her. It was her wedding-day, and she was about to marry the handsome, indifferent earl who stood by her side. All that had passed before seemed like a dream. The sunshine had awakened her. There came a confused vision of maids in waiting, of silk and lace, jewels and flowers. She had heard her own maid Amiee say:

"Poor young lady, it is hard to have neither mother nor sister."

Lady Riche had swept into the room, and had admired the beautiful wedding-dress. The only sensation that Hildred had had was one of cold, sick faintness. When she was dressed her father had kissed her and said:

"You will make a beautiful countess, Hildred."

She had thought the morning might bring her some token from her lover—a note or present—something to remind her of him; but it did not, and her heart misgave her sorely. Then, after a long drive, she found herself in the fashionable church of St. George's,

Hanover Square. There was a string of carriages outside; the church was crowded with spectators.

Amid the throng, the odor of flowers, the rustle of silk, the gleaming of satins, the shining of rare gems, with the white-robed minister before her, and the handsome earl by her side, she realized the fact that it was her wedding-day; hitherto everything had seemed as in a dream.

When would the reality grow less bitter for her? When would she cease to remember that, as he stood by her side, the earl seemed to avoid even touching the silken dress and wedding veil—that when his hand touched hers it was cold? No loving pressure reassured her; he barely touched her finger-tips; he averted his face, and never once, during the whole of the ceremony, looked at her. Would she ever forget the hard, cold voice that repeated the impressive words, "to love and to cherish till death do us part?" How false it all was! Who could look at him and believe that he loved her?

It seemed to her that she passed through a sea of faces—the people crowded round her as she went down the church. She saw the long line of carriages, the profusion of wedding favors. She made no attempt to speak; if she had done so, she would have lost herself in a passion of tears.

At home again, her father took her in his arms and kissed her face, whispering:

"My daughter, the Countess of Caraven."

Lady Riche had attempted a very mild caress.

"It went off very well," she said. "Lord Caraven

looked tired. I had no idea that we should have so many people there. I hope my fichu was all right. There were some very handsome dresses."

"A very pretty wedding," put in Lord St. Maure. "I feel that I have been busy to day in a good cause."

But the man who had married Hildred Ransome spoke never a word.

Then came the wedding-breakfast. Arley Ransome made a speech—described the day as the proudest of his life, passed a magnificent eulogium on his son-in-law, and then sat down. There was deep silence when the newly made husband stood up to make his speech. No one quite knew why, but an uncomfortable sensation came over all. He had but little to say. If he had put into words the thoughts that surged through his brain, he would have said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have been a spendthrift and a prodigal; I have wasted my substance; I have spent a large fortune—but I committed the shabbiest, wickedest act of my life to-day. I have married a young girl for her money, and I do not even like her; what is still worse, I never shall."

That was what he thought. What he said was an indistinct murmur; an attentive listener could distinguish only the words "honor," "pleasure," and "future." The earl sat down again, without having once looked at the face of his wife.

It seemed to her that she had been sitting there for hours; a small bunch of purple grapes lay on her plate, a glass of wine stood untouched by her side; someone was speaking to her, appealing to her by her new name.

"What does Lady Caraven say?"

She did not know what had preceded the question, so could not answer it, but looked round with a smile that satisfied the questioner.

Then the carriage drove up to the door, and the bride went to change her dress. Lady Riche went with her; the girl's forlorn manner and wistful face had touched even that worldly heart.

"I hope you will be happy, Lady Caraven," she said. "When they read the account of your wedding, every woman in London will envy you."

"Envy me," she re-echoed— I, who have neither mother nor sisters!"

"My dear Lady Caraven, you have a husband and a father, which I think better. Let me give you one little bit of advice. You are going to face the great, cold world; have nothing to do with sentiment, and as far as possible care more for yourself than anyone else."

"That is not a happy marriage," thought Lady Riche, as she turned away. "What a sad face the girl has! Yet she has married an earl. Well, some people are never satisfied."

Lord Caraven bade his adieux; he shook hands with Arley Ransome, cutting short a gushing speech that the lawyer had carefully prepared. Then Arley Ransome was touched again. Someone said that Lady Caraven was in the morning room, waiting to say good-bye to him there alone.

The tender arms were clinging round him, the dark eyes looking into his—a sad, wistful face, full of pathetic inquiry, was near his own.

"Papa," she whispered, and there was an agony of entreaty in her voice, "you are quite sure that you have not deceived me—you are quite sure that I can be happy without love?"

He laughed.

"You will find that the Countess of Caraven has more to think about than a trifle like love, Hildred."

Her arms fell from him; she raised her sad, sweet, girlish face from his breast.

"I will believe you, papa," she said; "I will trust you to the very end."

Then she went away, and Arley Ransome would have spent a far happier day if those words had not lingered with him.

* * * * *

Hildred was alone with her husband at last. Now surely he would say something to her—speak to her of that love that he must feel for her; he would not keep up the same indifference now she was his wife. The words that she thirsted for, that she longed to hear, he would surely utter; surely he would bend over her and say something, were it only the two words, "My wife."

What were his first words? She had thought of many things that he might say to her—sweet, tender words; the reality was far different. He leaned back with an air of utter weariness.

"I never remember to have found time pass so slowly in my life," he said. "The sun is very warm. Would you like the carriage hood raised?"

She made no answer. He did not even seem to notice it.

"I wish," he said, "someone would bring in a bill for the abolition of wedding-breakfasts."

Her face flushed with anger.

"A bill for the abolition of weddings would be even better," she said.

He was so far from understanding her that he laughed. The pain in her voice did not reach him.

"Do you like being on the sea at night?" he inquired, after a long pause.

"I hardly know my own likes or dislikes yet," she replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Because the boat leaves Dover for Calais about eleven, and I thought we would take it."

"As you please," she replied.

Her face was quite pale, her lips were white and pressed firmly together. In her heart was a sense of desolation that words could not describe. He wondered at her silence, her gravity. It was the height of the season at Dover, and the band was playing on the pier. He sat with his wife in the dining-room of the Lord Warden, when he saw her suddenly start as though she were frightened. She covered her face with her hands, and when she looked up again her eyes were dim with tears.

It was all because the band was playing "Love's Young Dream."

CHAPTER VII

SUCH A STRANGE WEDDING TRIP

Night on the sea! Innumerable stars shone in the sky, lambent, bright, and were reflected in the waves. A western wind, sweet as the breath of spring, had swept over the land and sea, stirring the blue waves and cresting them with foam. But now the stillness of the sea was something marvelous and beautiful; it was as though the great dark shadow of night brooded over the waters—a stillness broken only by the rushing of the water through the paddle-wheels of the steamer. Slowly the line of lights round the coast disappeared, and at last land was out of sight; there was nothing visible but the heaving, silvery waters and the sky above.

Lady Caraven sat on the deck; the stewardess had advised her to go to the ladies' cabin, but she declined. Why seek the close, warm cabin while the stars were shining on the sea? The captain had brought a comfortable seat for her; she had a warm shawl. A faint hope stirred the young wife's heart; perhaps, when Lord Caraven saw her there alone, he might come and talk to her.

She saw him once or twice. Once he asked her if she enjoyed the beauty of the night, and her answer was "Yes;" then, as though he had fulfilled a duty,

with an air of relief he walked away. She was left to her thoughts—and they were strange ones.

This was her wedding-day. Her husband was the tall, proud, handsome man who avoided that part of the boat where she sat. They were husband and wife, yet they hardly exchanged three words; it was so strange that there were times when she fancied it must be a dream. Was this anything like love? The wind kissed the waves; the stars shone reflected in the water; and with sharp, keen, sweet memory, there came to her words she had read only a few short days before:

"I have gone mad—I love you—let me die!"

the words Elaine spoke when her heart first opened to the knowledge of her love.

Was the time for such love as this gone by? Had the current of men's lives been so completely changed that love had become a contract—a business arrangement? If so, she wished that she had lived in Elaine's days. Would to heaven that some faint breath of that old world love had been hers—some faint breath of that mighty passion that had worked so much evil and so much good!

She looked across the deck; her husband—how strangely the word sounded!—was leaning over the rails, talking to some stranger. The moon shone full on his handsome face, on the fair, clustering hair. Surely no knight of old was ever more comely. Did he love her? He must have loved her, or he would never have married her.

But what manner of love was this? If she could

but forget all she had read, and learn to look on love as he evinced it; if she could but lay these ghosts that seemed to haunt her—ghosts of the mightiest passion that ever stirred men's hearts; if she could but still the beating heart, the beating pulse! That was her husband with the clear-cut face and noble head—her husband, whom that very day she had sworn to love until death. He was smiling at something that his companion had said, a cold, clear, bright smile—cold and bright as the moonlight. She had a right to cross the deck and speak to him if she liked; she had a right to go to him, to lay her hand on his arm, to call him by his name.

If she did, would a gleam of tenderness flash into the handsome face, or would he turn half haughtily away? Should she go to him and say:

"My husband, love me a little. I am young, I am lonely and desolate—love me a little. Hold my hands in yours; let me stand by your side. Do not stay so far from me!"

What was it Elaine had cried?

"And I must die for want of one bold word."

Should she let the starlight pass, the witching, lonely night pass, and say nothing to him? Was this curious silence between them never to be broken? What caused it? What could it mean? Should she go to him and ask him why, if he loved her, he was ashamed to show it—why, if he did not love her, he had married her? Should she go?

She half rose from her seat. Even if she were imprudent, it would not matter; the silent stars could

keep their own secret—they would never tell what passed beneath them.

Then she hesitated. If he should turn contemptuously away! No, she would not go to him; it was his place to woo, not hers. If he wanted to speak to her, he would know where to find her. She would be wooed; she would not lose her dignity. She had read somewhere or other that men never loved women who sought them.

"So I will not seek him," she said to herself; "though I am not a woman yet—I am only a girl—only eighteen."

It was a fair, troubled, wistful face that was bent over the star-lighted water—a face sad with thoughts that should have had no place on her wedding-day. The earl had seen her rise, and came to her.

"Are you tired?" he asked. "We shall not be very long now; I can see the lights on the French coast. The night is very fine. Are you tired?"

"No, I never tire of the sea," she replied. "Indeed, I should like to live near it."

"Ravensmere is near the sea," he told her. "You can see it from the castle towers."

"I had forgotten that I was to live at Ravensmere, or I should not have said that," she remarked, quickly. "I did not know that it was near the sea."

"Your father has two maps of the estate. Have you not seen them?" he asked.

She looked at him wonderingly.

"Why should I see them?" she asked. "Certainly not."

"You do not inherit your father's business talents, then?" he said.

But he repented of the words almost before they were uttered. She did not understand them, or see the meaning of them. She answered, quite simply:

"No, I know nothing of business. I care much for study. I often think it strange that my father and I have not one taste in common."

He thought to himself that it was a fortunate thing. Then he asked her if she had ever been to Paris before—if she should like the center of the city—if there was any part that she preferred.

"I always stay at the Hotel Meurice, near the Tuileries," he said; "but if you prefer any other part—"

No. She had been to Paris only once—that was for her holidays. She knew nothing of the city. And then the young husband looked over the blue waters. He had shown her due politeness and attention. He was ill at ease and longing to be away again. He did not notice how wistful was the fair, young face turned to him. He bowed politely and went away.

She clinched her little hand; she tried to still the beating of her heart. Her husband—married that day—yet had he no more to say than this? The lights on the French coast were close at hand; she could even in the silence hear the waves breaking on the shore. Amice stood near, with a large carriage-wrap in her hand. Lady Caraven wondered if her husband would come to her, or if he would allow her to land with the help of servants.

He approached hurriedly.

"We have time for refreshments," he said; "the train will not start for twenty minutes."

They went into the refreshment-room, where he ordered soup and wine. He was solicitous for her comfort, he was attentive to her wants, but she noticed that he spoke to her only when civility dictated that he should speak, and that when he did address her he never looked at her.

He took his seat by her side in the railway-carriage. They traveled through the fresh dewy night, the pleasant air coming in at the open windows. He had carefully provided her with books and newspapers—with railway literature.

"It is quite evident," she thought, "that he intends me to read—he has no desire to talk to me."

They did not exchange many words. Sometimes, when the wind blew, he asked her if she was chilly. He offered to close the window, but she would not allow him—it was some relief to her to watch the fair sky and the fair earth. This was such a strange wedding-trip. She wondered if the time would ever come that he and she would laugh over it—would wonder why they had both been so silent, so reserved. She wondered a thousand things. Would her husband ever laugh and talk gayly, brightly to her, as he had done to the gentleman on deck. Would he in time lay aside his reserve, his coldness? Would he ever look pleased or bright?

How strange that he should be so grave, so still—that he had not even one kind word to say to her on this, their wedding-day! How strange that he had

paid her no compliment, never asked her opinion on any subject, never treated her otherwise than with the courtesy due to a stranger!

She was obliged continually to remind herself that he had asked her to be his wife. He must have cared for her, or he would not have married her. He was not a demonstrative man, perhaps. Then she turned slowly from the sky to the handsome, high-bred face near her. He was reading intently, never looking up from his book. It was not the face of a cold-hearted cynic—far from it. Then her eyes wandered slowly away again.

The lovely dawn was flushing in the skies, the birds were singing, the air seemed to stir with new life—it was the dawn of another day. How often would the sun rise and set before she would understand this strange silence of the husband by her side—how many weary dawns would there be?

Suddenly—she could not tell why—her eyes filled with tears. The sky, the trees, the distant hills, were all blurred and indistinct. She experienced a keen sense of desolation that no words could express. She would have given anything to be back with her father again.

"Paris at last?" said Lord Caraven. "What a long journey it has been. I am always longing for some motive power greater than steam—I should like to travel more quickly."

But she had no laughing answer. It had struck her that no husband ought to find his first journey with his wife long or tiresome. Again the sweet, wild words of Elaine came to her:

"I have gone mad—I love you—let me die."

There was neither love nor madness here.

Paris at last—Paris in the gay morning sunlight. They drove straight to the hotel; and then, for the first time, it seemed to her, he spoke kindly. He said:

"You look very tired—I should advise you to get some rest. I always find a cigar and the morning air most refreshing after a journey."

Half an hour afterward she stood alone in her room. She looked at herself in the tall mirror. It was a pale face, with wistful, shadowed eyes, that she saw therein. She was fatigued in body and in mind, yet she could not sleep. If she only understood, if she only knew the meaning of this silent love of her husband's that had never yet been expressed in words!

CHAPTER VIII

"YOU KNOW WHY I MARRIED YOU"

A week had passed since Lady Caraven reached Paris—a strange week. She had seen but little of her husband. He never took breakfast with her; they met at dinner, and twice he had taken her to the opera. He never interfered in the least with any of her affairs. He sent up her letters unopened, and never even inquired from whom they came. He sent every morning to ask if she had any particular wish for that day—if there was any place she desired to see. At first she said "Yes," and went to the different places of note. He accompanied her, but she could not avoid thinking that he was slightly bored by these excursions. The next time he sent she declined, and he did not remonstrate; he made no remark, and she felt almost sure that he was relieved by her refusal. When they went to the opera, they were never alone—he always secured some companion. It seemed to Hildred that he was quite as much a stranger as on the first day he entered the Hollies.

"Shall I ever be part of his life?" she thought. "Shall I grow to be heart of his heart, soul of his soul? Shall I ever know what he thinks, what he likes, what he loves?"

She had, indeed, no part in his existence—he lived

as though she were not. He had fulfilled his part of the contract by giving her his name, his rank, his position. That a living, beating human heart might long for more did not occur to him. He never thought of her as his wife; the chances were that, if anyone had asked him suddenly if he was married, he would have said "No." He had paid the forfeit of his folly by being in some measure compelled to burden himself with this young girl.

And it was a burden. He did not care to look at the wistful, girlish face, to meet the dark eyes eloquent with a thousand thoughts, to see the scarlet lips mute and tremulous. He was not of an unkindly nature. He was indolent, careless, selfish in most respects, but not unkindly; he would not, if he knew it, cause deliberate pain—he could not have enjoyed the torture of anything created. It was said of him that he had turned away sick and faint at witnessing the death agony of a bird he had wounded, but not killed. Such a man could not be deliberately, wantonly cruel; and this wistful, girlish face with the dark, sad eyes, troubled him.

At first he was considerably surprised in his wife. He thought to himself that the daughter of a man like lawyer Ransome, sharp, shrewd, cunning, must inherit some of his propensities—that she would occupy herself with small intrigues and maneuvers of all kinds. She did nothing of the sort; she was quiet, grave, calm, self-possessed. He did not even dream of the unstirred passion and tenderness in her girlish heart.

It was decidedly tiresome having a wife. True he

saw little of her—for days together they sometimes did not exchange a word; but people had begun to look upon him as a married man, and he did not like it—when they met him they asked how Lady Caraven was.

"Lady Caraven!" He smiled scornfully to himself, remembering all the fair and stately dames who had borne that name; remembering the dark-eyed girl who now bore it, he smiled in bitterest scorn.

He had never been one of those men who look forward to marriage as the one great end and aim of life. It had never had any charm for him, even in the days when he was free to dream as he would; but his visions had been of a golden-haired love, radiant and fair, never of a girl-wife, the daughter of a man who had, as it were, outwitted him—the child of a man who had dealt faithlessly with him. He shuddered at the very thought of it.

He was not given to thought—the rules of right and wrong had not troubled him very much. He never realized that it was wrong to have married a girl he did not like—wrong to leave a young wife so entirely alone. He never thought of those things; he only remembered that marriage was a burden to him, that his wife's presence was some kind of mute reproach, that he was a thousand times happier away from her than with her.

Certainly he felt the burden less at Paris than he would have felt it elsewhere, because there was always something to occupy him and distract his thoughts, there were always kind friends to relieve him of the *ennui* and tediousness of existence.

One evening he was rather startled by Hildred. There was a favorite singer at the opera, and they went to hear her. She was very fair, and the gentlemen were busily engaged in discussing her. With Lord and Lady Caraven was a Frenchman, the Comte de Quesne, a great admirer of fair women. The conversation, kept up chiefly between the two gentlemen, was about the charming actress.

"She is of the real English type," said the comte, "and the English ladies are so fair—they are adorable!"

"I think myself," remarked the earl, "that a fair-haired English girl is certainly the loveliest object in creation."

The comte laughed.

"You prefer the blondes to the brunettes, then?" he said.

"Certainly," replied Lord Caraven. "I do not see how a woman can be beautiful unless she be fair."

He had entirely forgotten his young girl-wife with the dark eyes and the Spanish face. He would not have wantonly pained her, but he had forgotten her presence. She heard the words. At the time she made no remark, although they burned into her heart like fire.

The comte went home with them, and they were joined by another friend; but she found an opportunity of speaking to her husband when the other gentlemen were busy with *ecarte*, and Lord Caraven had withdrawn to look over some letters that had just arrived. She summoned up courage and went up to him.

"Lord Caraven," she said, "would you mind telling me one thing?"

He looked up in wonder—it was so seldom that she voluntarily addressed him. As he looked he was slightly impressed with her appearance—the tall, slender figure was draped in soft, shining silk, the girlish face was flushed with the effort of speaking to him, the dark eyes were bright and starlike, filled with unutterable thoughts. He could not help owing to himself that there was some beauty in the thick coils of dark hair, in the tall, slim, graceful figure, in the perfect grace and harmony. She was simply yet beautifully dressed; a pomegranate-blossom lay in the coils of her hair.

"I want you to tell me one thing," she repeated. "If you admire fair girls with golden hair, why did you marry me, with hair and eyes so dark?"

She asked the question in such perfect good faith, in such earnest tones, with such sad, sweet eyes, that he was touched, not deeply, but as he would have been had some child come to him with trembling lips to tell a pitiful tale.

"Why," she said, "if that was the case, did you marry me?"

"You know why I married you," he replied, gravely—"why ask me the question?"

He saw a vivid color spread over her face, a bright light shine in her eyes. The simple girl thought and believed he meant that she knew he had married her because he loved her. Her heart gave a great, glad bound. He loved her! She would understand

better in time; she would know why he seemed reserved, reticent, cold, and indifferent.

"You know why I married you," the handsome earl had said; and the words filled her heart with a strange, sweet pain.

"I will try to remember," she said, gently.

Dull as was his ear, he heard new music in her voice.

"You will remember what?" he asked.

"I will remember why you have married me," she replied; and as she went away he wondered greatly.

"I should not think that she is likely to forget it," he said to himself. "Certainly women are puzzles. She will try to remember why I married her—and the words seemed like melting music on her lips, a light that was like sunshine on flowers spread over her face! Why, I married her because her father sold her for a title and she was willing to be sold!"

To those dying with thirst the fall of dew is a boon. To Lady Caraven the earl's few words seemed full of meaning; she said them over and over again to herself, "You know why I married you." She said them with many varieties of accent, with different intonations, and each time that she repeated them they seemed to mean more and more. For some hours she felt much happier; it was like a break in the cold tide of indifference. She kept expecting kinder words to follow, but they did not. Lord Caraven did not appear to remember what he had said.

He went out that evening after the "little supper" was over. She heard a whisper of "billiards."

Nothing came of the one solitary gleam of kindness. The next day Hildred did not see the earl at all; he went over to St. Cloud with some of his friends. The slight gleam of happiness died away, and the old feeling of desolation came back to her. The Comtesse de Quesne called and pressed her to go out but the girl was sick at heart. It was such a strange life—married without love, without even friendship or liking—married, yet living with her husband as though she were the merest stranger—his wife, bearing his name, sharing his fate, yet knowing no more of him than did the lowest servant in the household; his thoughts, his mind, his plans, his desires, his interests, his amusements, his pleasures were all strange to her. It was an unheard-of position, an unheard-of fate.

"If I did not know that he had married me because he loved me, I should say rather that he did not like me," was a thought which often occurred to her, but she drove it away as unworthy. "If I were beautiful," thought the lonely girl, "I should think that he had married me for my beauty—if I had grand connections, for them; but I have none—I have nothing—'my love has stooped to me from high estate.' I shall never understand what he saw in me to make him love me."

She had paid so little attention to the words that she did not even remember that she had been called "Arley Ransome's heiress." Of all the ideas that occurred to her, the one that she had been married for her money was the furthest from her thoughts.

Three weeks had passed away, and Lord Caraven

began to wonder how much longer he was to remain in Paris. If he had been free to follow his own inclinations, they would have led him to the gaming-tables at Baden-Baden. But, as he said impatiently, he had no idea of going there with a whole train of people to look after.

How long would she expect to remain in Paris? The honeymoon—that most absurd of all institutions—was supposed to last a month. It would be better, perhaps, to remain there until it was over, and then go to Ravensmere. He would be more comfortable there. The house was spacious, and it would be possible for him to move about without being haunted by the girlish, wistful face. So in Paris, until the honeymoon was over, he decided on remaining.

CHAPTER IX

"I HAVE GONE MAD—I LOVE YOU—LET ME DIE"

Lady Caraven was willing to go to Ravensmere—willing to go anywhere that the earl suggested. She had grown quiescent. A new, strange feeling was stirring in her breast; it was love for her husband—love for the handsome, debonair earl.

She did not know it; she was simple, inexperienced, unused in all the ways of love. She knew nothing of the signs that heralded its approach—she knew nothing of its pains, its torments, its pleasures—she knew nothing of its thousand and one Protean shapes. She remembered so distinctly when the first beating of her heart made her almost afraid of him. They had gone together to a fashionable ball. Lord Caraven was always scrupulously polite to his wife in public—never kind, never affectionate, but frigidly polite. He always led her to a seat, remaining on duty for a few minutes, holding her fan and her bouquet. She was the only one who ever heard his faint sigh of relief when the duty was over.

On this evening she had taken great pains with her dress. It was of the palest, prettiest shade of pink—"Tears of roses," *larmes des roses*, her milliner had called it—and the delicate tint improved her as noth-

ing else could have done. With it she wore a superb *parure* of diamonds.

"Miladi is *magnifique* to-night," said Amiee, proudly.

And Lady Caraven looked wistfully into the mirror.

She must have been blind not to see the startling loveliness therein. The low evening dress showed exquisitely-molded shoulders and a fair neck white as marble; a diamond cross shone on the white breast. There was a dainty bloom on the southern face. The noble, queenly head looked worthy of the diamond tiara; but no smile of content or satisfaction parted the crimson lips.

"I wish," she said with a deep sigh—"oh, how I wish that I had golden hair! I wish that I could change it."

"Why, my lady, you have the most beautiful hair in all the world," cried the maid, who honestly believed it. "I have never seen hair so long, so shining, so soft."

"It is the wrong color," sighed Lady Caraven; "but even if I could change my hair, my eyes will always be dark;" and to herself she added: "He does not like dark eyes—he said so."

Many admiring eyes followed the countess that evening.

"That will be one of the handsomest women in Europe," said a courtly ambassador, who spent quite as much time in making love as he did in arranging matters political. "I should like to see her again in two years' time—she will look like one of Titian's subjects just come out of its frame."

On this night, as on other occasions, the earl stood patiently by his young wife until he was released. Then their hostess came to speak to her, bringing with her the prettiest woman in the room, Madame de Comballe, a lovely young blonde, who was charmed with the English countess. She sat down by Hildred's side, and began talking in her gay, lively fashion.

"I have not seen your husband yet," said madame. "They tell me he is young and handsome. Is it so?"

Hildred's face flushed crimson; madame laughed good-naturedly.

"You blush," she said. "How droll! I should not blush if you praised my husband. It is all so different with you English—you marry for love, and blush all your lives."

"There is my husband," said Hildred, quietly—"you can judge for yourself."

Madame looked in the direction indicated. She was silent for a few minutes, and then she said, slowly:

"Rumor was right this time—he is very handsome and distinguished-looking. I admire him very much. My husband is sixty years old, and has white hair—see, he stands there, with a star on his breast."

On looking, Hildred saw an elderly man, very plain, very stout.

"How strange!" she said, impulsively. "He looks much older than you do."

"I hope so," returned madame with a little laugh; "but it was an excellent marriage, an excellent arrangement—everyone said so."

"An arrangement," repeated Hildred— what a strange word!"

"Why strange? asked madame frankly. "I had— so everyone was pleased to say—a charming face and a perfect temper. Monsieur had a large fortune and an ancient name. Could anything be more equal?"

"But love," said the puzzled girl, "you say nothing of love, madame."

The lady laughed. Was there the least touch of bitterness, the slightest suspicion of pain, in that laugh—or was Hildred mistaken?

"Love? That is—pardon me—an English mistake. You marry for love in England and it comes to the same thing; we marry in France because it is suitable. The end is the same, so far as I can see. Your husband is certainly the handsomest man in the room to night; you ought to be proud of him."

Madame went away to join the dancers, and Hildred looked long at her husband's face. It was undeniably handsome, but she fancied the expression was not one of happiness. She was proud of him. He was cold and indifferent, yet he was her husband; he had chosen her from the whole world to be his wife. There were lovely women in the room—women of the type he admired, fair, with golden hair—women whom he had met and known before; he might have married one of these, but he had chosen her.

It was then that the first faint thrill of wifely love passed over her like the breath of a summer wind, leaving her faint and trembling—that love that was to be strong as death—that was to leave all, dare all,

conquer all—that was to crown her glorious womanhood—that was to tune her whole being to perfect harmony.

She had admired the earl, she had liked him, she had been puzzled by him, she had wondered at him; but this was the first time that she had cared for him. There came to her a sweet, sudden, sharp pain, a sudden gleam of happiness, a sensation that made her heart and her head whirl. Those words of Elaine's that had haunted her did not seem so strange now:

"I have gone mad—I love you—let me die!"

She had thought them exaggerated before; she had wondered at them. She did not do so now. She felt that the same impulse was within her. She could have stretched out her arms, and have gone to him, crying: "I have gone mad—I love you!" She could understand something of it now, that sharp, sweet pain. There came to her mind the words of an old song:

"Love is bitter-sweet, they say."

Could it be that this same pain grown all sweet, this same strange glamour, was what the poet meant when he said there was "nothing half so sweet in life as love's young dream?" Did he, her husband, who never looked toward that part of the room where she was—did he care for her after this fashion? No; if he did he would talk to her. At that moment, if she had been asked what was her highest ideal of worldly bliss, she would have answered: "Talking to my husband."

She watched him. Where had she read these lines?

"His sunny hair
Clustered about his temples like a god's."

They described him well. She watched him. How courteous, how graceful he was. He was talking now to a duchess—how courtly and chivalrous was his manner!

"If he would but smile so when he speaks to me," she said to herself. "His eyes are always cold; no warmth or brightness ever comes into them for me."

She could not help feeling proud of him. Do as she would, a sense of proprietorship came over her. He might talk gayly and brightly to these ladies, but he was her husband. From all the world he had chosen to marry her. He cared for no one else—that was certain.

In some way that she could hardly understand that night formed an epoch in her life. She found out then how much she admired her husband, and she had felt the first faint thrill of that love which was to be as her life. Life was never quite the same to her again.

Time passed on, and brought with it no change. The earl lengthened his stay in Paris because some intimate friends of his came hither, and he, in consequence, was well amused, while Hildred shrank more and more from the great, gay, heartless world. She grew in beauty every day; the change of scene, the clear, brilliant atmosphere, the magnificence that surrounded her, all seemed to aid in developing her. She was an unformed school-girl when Ulric Caraven first

took her hither; she was a graceful, self-possessed woman of the world when she left. The regular features developed into wonderful beauty. The expression of her face was, perhaps, its greatest charm—it was one of expectation. The dark, lustrous eyes seemed to be always asking a question. The sweet, sad lips were parted, as though she were about to speak. Lord Caraven was the only one near her who did not see and marvel at the change. It was a face now to arrest the attention of a poet or artist; passion and tenderness, subdued hope, were all there.

There were times when Lord Caraven was startled at hearing people compliment him on the great beauty of his wife. He accepted all such compliments in a spirit of good-humored toleration. He was very kind, of course—he knew that she was merely an unformed school-girl; still, if they liked to believe in her beauty, he had really no objection. He never looked at the girl's sweet face to see if it was true.

September had almost passed when the earl once more mentioned home. He asked his wife if she could tear herself from the dissipations of Paris. He wondered that she looked so bright at going away. He did not know what she was thinking. Here, in this brilliant, sunny Paris, he had not shown any love for her; he had, in fact, hardly seen her—he had treated her as a perfect stranger. But it might be different in his own home—it might be different at Ravensmere, where he would be alone with her; he might learn to care for her then.

"You look pleased at the idea of going," he said, briefly.

"I am pleased," she replied. "Are you not?"

"No. I like Ravensmere; but it is very dull. It is suitable for what people call lovers of nature—the scenery around it is among the finest in England; but I am always dull there."

"We must hope it will be different now," she said, timidly.

He thought she meant because of the increase in his prosperity. She meant because she would be there, and would try to amuse him.

"I do not know," he said. "I fancy it will be pretty much the same."

She turned away, wounded by his coldness. Long after everyone else was asleep she remembered words that seemed to illustrate her fate:

"I alone awake—

My eyes are full of tears, my heart of love;
My heart is breaking, and my eyes are dim,
And I am all weary of my life."

CHAPTER X

"THE GOOD ANGEL OF THE HOUSE"

It was a chill evening at the end of October when the Earl and Countess of Caraven reached Ravensmere. No preparations had been made to receive and welcome them. There was no gathering of tenantry. The earl's tenants simply detested the sound of his name. They had been so heavily burdened, so taxed and tormented by the earl's confidential agent, Mr. Blantyre, that they had no welcome left for his master. They considered him an unjust landlord, and they did not scruple to say so. There were no glad shouts of welcome for him; even the curly-headed children had heard so often of the earl's folly and neglect that they had no cheer for him when his carriage drove through the streets of Court Raven. Nor was there any warm welcome from the servants. They were most of them new ones; all the old retainers had died off or gone away, the earl had never replaced them. The house had become dilapidated; the servants were few, the stables empty.

It was all different now—John Blantyre had had *carte blanche*. The interior of the castle had been beautified, decorated, and refurnished. well-trained servants had been brought from London; the stables had been filled. There was a general air of prosperity

about the place, so that the earl hardly knew it again.

Did Lord Caraven miss the welcome? Did he see that he was disliked by his tenants—that his servants seemed to have no interest in him? Did it strike him that a life of self-indulgence always brings its own reward? Lady Caraven gazed with wonder at the magnificent home which was to be hers. The first words she said to her husband were:

"I had no idea that Ravensmere was so large."

He looked half incredulously at her.

"Did you not really feel interested enough in the place to ask about it?" he inquired.

"I was very much interested in it," she replied, quietly, "but I never thought of asking any questions."

"I should have fancied that you would know all about it," he said—"the number of rooms and their contents. I am surprised that you do not."

She did not in the least understand the drift of his words. That he should ever fancy that she was mercenary, that she wanted the full value for all the money she had brought him, never occurred to her.

It was but a sorry welcome home. The earl felt humiliated, disgraced. He remembered to have heard his father speak of the rejoicings when he had brought his young wife home—how that fair bride, his mother, had listened with tears in her eyes to the cheers and cries of welcome—how she had clasped her husband's hand, saying, "We will deal with them as we wish heaven to deal with us." Now he had brought his wife home and not a cheer was raised for him; there

was not a cry of welcome, not a smile. Strange voices greeted him, strange faces surrounded him. His wife looked sad and wistful. A brilliant fire was burning in all the rooms, while a chill, gray fog hung like a pall without, but the bright fires and the bright light could not give warmth to their reception.

They dined together almost in silence. Lord Caraven did not tell his wife what a comfort he felt it to see the family plate once more in use. Hildred was slightly overwhelmed by the magnificence of everything around. How little she dreamed that her fortune had preserved the grand old place from utter ruin—that but for her the massive plate, the beautiful pictures, even the old walls themselves, would have passed from the Caravens, and the family name would have been written in the dust!

Perhaps some such thought occurred to him as he looked at the sweet face before him; perhaps that thought made him feel a little more kindly toward Hildred.

After all she had saved him from ruin. He might think what he would of her—she was a money-lender's daughter—she had been given to him with her money in exchange for his title and position—her father was cunning, shrewd, and mercenary, unscrupulous and ambitious—yet she had certainly saved him from the blackest ruin that could fall on mortal man. It made him feel a little more kindly toward her, but he did not love her—nothing was further from his thoughts; still he remembered that but for her he would never have seen Ravensmere again.

That gave him the idea that she, too, was entitled to some consideration. He had told her father frankly enough that he should never like her, and he knew that he never should. But the money she had brought him had saved him from ruin. He ought to study her comfort and be grateful to her. After dinner was over, instead of lingering over his claret, he joined her in the drawing-room.

"I have been thinking," he began, "that you would like to see the house; some of the rooms are very handsome, some of the pictures very fine."

"I should be very pleased," she said, gently.

"I have been thinking, too, that you ought to have your choice of rooms. My mother used a very beautiful suite in the western wing. You shall see them all and judge for yourself."

"I should not like them to be very far away from the rest of the household," she said.

'Do you believe in the Ravensmere ghosts?" he asked, laughingly.

"I have never heard of them. But in a large house like this I should not care to feel that I was quite alone."

"You shall choose for yourself," he said, briefly.

Perhaps the hour that followed was the happiest Hildred had known since her marriage. At the Hotel Meurice, although he had been careful to show her every kindness, he had not thought of her or studied her. At Ravensmere it was quite different. The servants, he knew, would watch him closely, and would make their own comments on his behavior;

and, if they saw that he slighted his wife, they would imitate his example quickly enough. That he would not allow. She was only a money-lender's daughter—a woman he could never like—but she had saved him from ruin; she should at least be respected.

So he talked to her, and showed her the various art treasures, the costly pictures, the statues, the ancient armor. She was pleased and bright and interested in all he said. He showed her the library, where the accumulated treasures of so many scholars lay. When she had seen and admired all, he said to her:

"If all this were on the verge of destruction, and one woman came forward to save it, what would you call her?"

"I should call her the good angel of the house," she replied, not having the least idea that he was referring to her.

He bowed to her.

"That shall be my name for you," he said. "You shall be the good angel of the house."

She had chosen her rooms in the western wing—rooms that opened on to a broad, beautiful terrace—from the windows of which one saw pleasant glimpses of garden and distant landscape. The housekeeper, Mrs. Hampton, showed her over the whole suite. Lady Caraven preferred these.

"You will be lonely, my lady," she said; "most of the Ladies Caraven have preferred the eastern wing."

Hildred thought to herself that there had never been another Lady Caraven like her. She had been married—so it seemed from the words her husband had

just spoken—for her money; she was not there because she was beloved by the master of the house, but simply as an appendage of her money. It mattered but little what rooms she chose; she did not at present even feel so much at home as did the servants in the house.

"Your ladyship has decided then on this suite?" said the housekeeper.

Lady Caraven did not even hear her; she was looking sadly round the rooms. How many years would this be her home? How many long, weary hours of suspense and pain would she pass here? Would she soon tire of this gilded splendor? She would be always alone—her rooms always silent and desolate; no loving face would brighten them, no glad voices cheer them. Alone all her life! No wonder that she turned with a sigh from the flower-wreathed window.

The housekeeper looked curiously at the young face with the sad, sweet eyes.

"You have decided, my lady, upon these rooms?" she repeated.

"Yes," said the young countess; "I prefer them to any others. And I will remain here now while my boxes are unpacked. I will not go down again."

Mrs. Hampton thought her decision strange, indeed; it was the young wife's first evening in her husband's home, yet she preferred remaining alone in her rooms while he was alone downstairs.

"Shall I take that message to the earl?" she asked.

Lady Caraven looked up in some surprise.

"Oh, no!" she replied. "Lord Caraven will not expect me."

And the housekeeper, who was a shrewd woman in her way, thought that it seemed a strange kind of marriage where husband and wife preferred solitude to each other's society.

CHAPTER XI

"MARRIAGE IS A MISTAKE AT THE BEST"

"We have some visitors coming to-day," said the Earl of Caraven to his young wife. "The dinner will be an hour later, and rooms must be prepared. Sir Charles and Lady Courtenay live at some little distance—they will not arrive until late."

"Do you mean," she said, "that I am to arrange for your guests—for their wants and comfort?"

"What terribly straightforward questions you ask!" he replied, laughingly. "You are sole mistress of the house—you must give all orders in it."

"I have not learned to think of myself yet as mistress of this house," she rejoined, with proud composure.

"Then I must ask you to begin," he said. "You are, indeed, sole mistress of this house; everyone in it is bound to obey you—whatever you direct is to be done."

"But," returned Hildred, "yesterday when I went into the housekeeper's room, she did not seem inclined to submit to my authority at all. She said that her keys were mislaid when I wanted to look over the linen-press. I fancy that she thinks I am rather too young to hold much authority."

"I will soon settle that matter," said the earl.

He rang the bell, and in answer to his summons a servant came. He sent for the housekeeper, who looked slightly troubled at the unexpected call.

"Mrs. Hampton," said the earl, sternly, "I have sent for you to say that every order given by Lady Caraven is to be attended to instantly—that she is to be obeyed implicitly, as I am obeyed myself—that the least show of disrespect or disobedience will be punished by immediate dismissal. You will see that my commands are carried out."

"I will do so, my lord."

"You will go for the future to Lady Caraven for all your orders—you will take them only from her."

"Thank you, my lord," said the housekeeper, retiring with a sense of relief.

Hildred turned to her husband.

"And I thank you, too," she said calmly. "I should not have spoken but that I saw there was a disposition in the house to ignore my authority—I knew that you would not like that."

"Certainly not—you have done quite right," he told her—and a sudden sense of her cruel position came over him. Was it likely that the servants would show much respect to one who, they could plainly see, was an unloved wife?

He quitted the breakfast-room not quite satisfied with himself and not satisfied with her.

"Marriage is a mistake at the best of times," he said, "but marriage for money is the greatest mistake of all."

Evening came and brought the expected guests—

Sir Charles Courtenay, a young baronet, who had but one idea, and that was love for his wife, Lady Alice Courtenay, who was pretty, lively, and accomplished. Hildred liked her at once. Her face was sunny and fair, but laughing eyes and sweet lips made a very attractive picture. Hildred looked at her with something like envy. She was charmingly dressed, and had a bright expression of countenance.

That evening, when Lady Caraven was dressing for dinner, her faithful maid could hardly be satisfied; she brought out jewels, flowers; ornaments of all kinds.

"Do wear them, my lady," she said; "if you would but let me help you more in your toilets. Lady Courtenay is so beautifully dressed—do not let her have all the admiration."

The girl had grown so sorry for her young mistress that she sometimes ventured to speak familiarly to her.

Hildred sat listlessly before the toilet-table; neither jewels, flowers nor dresses had the least interest for her.

"I think it is very probable that all the admiration will fall to her lot whether I take pains with my dress or not," she said, musingly.

"My lady," returned the girl, earnestly, "you do not know how beautiful you are—you do not, indeed. If you would but take some little interest—you have a lovely figure and beautiful hair—if you would but care a little more!"

Lady Caraven laughed good-temperedly; the girl's admiration was so sincere that she could not be angry.

"I will care more," she said, making a desparate effort to rouse herself. "What am I to do?"

Amiee was all animation. She brought out a beautiful dinner dress—a dress that looked like a soft black cloud tinged with golden light.

"Amber and black!" said Lady Caraven. "Surely I am dark enough, Amiee. Lord Caraven likes everything about him bright and fair. I should wear something lighter if I mean to please him."

"You promised, my lady, that I should dress you as I liked to-day."

"It does not matter," she said, indifferently; and so the amber and black was worn.

Nothing could have suited her better. The low dinner dress showed the exquisitely-molded neck and shoulders, the rounded arms; it displayed the beautiful contour of a figure tall and graceful. The mass of dark, waving hair was arranged in thick, shining coils, fastened with a diamond arrow; one dark crimson flower lay in their depths. A pearl necklace was clasped round the graceful throat, a bracelet round one of the dimpled arms.

Amiee's pride was great. There might be a thousand ladies present—none would be so beautiful as hers.

Lady Courtenay looked up in wonder as her lovely young hostess entered the drawing-room. She turned to the earl, with whom she was most intimate—they had played together when children.

"How falsely people speak!" she said. "I heard that you had married a great heiress, but that she was quite a plain little school-girl. I must congratulate you on the rare beauty of your wife."

"Little she certainly is not," returned the earl, laughingly; "my—my wife is tall, I consider."

"And she is beautiful!" said Lady Courtenay. "She looks like a Spanish princess. You do not often see faces like hers in England—we are all red and white."

"So you ought to be," he replied; "I can as soon imagine a dark angel as admire a dark woman."

"You retain your old love for the blondes," said Lady Courtenay. "I am a far better judge, and I tell you that the fair pink-and-white faces of most English women would pale into insignificance before the rich bloom, the exquisite coloring, the dark, lustrous eyes of your wife."

"I really ought to thank you in her name," he responded.

"You ought to love her very much, for she is worth loving," said Lady Courtenay, frankly.

"Has anyone told you that I do not love her?" he asked.

"No; certainly not; but, though she is so beautiful, she does not look happy. Her eyes ought to be filled with sunshine—they are sad and dreary. It is not a happy face, Lord Caraven."

But he had heard quite enough of the topic—his wife's face did not interest him. He looked at her with some curiosity after Lady Courtenay had spoken, and for the first time he was impressed with her growing beauty.

"Lady Alice has rightly described her," he said to himself. "She is like a Spanish princess. She would be perfect if she had a mantilla and a fan."

Then he forgot all about it, and was soon busy talking over old Oxford days with Sir Charles.

It was not a happy face. Hildred took her place at the brilliantly-appointed table. She was perfectly calm and self-possessed. In her thoughtful consideration for others she made an admirable hostess; her tact and graciousness were beyond all praise. But hers was not a happy face. She did not voluntarily join in the conversation—with a quick, flashing smile she answered when she was spoken to, but she seldom volunteered a remark. When she was not speaking—when her face was in repose—there came over it an air of dreamy languor, of sadness, of thought, painful to see in one so young.

"What can be wrong here?" thought Lady Courtenay. "There is plenty of money; they are both young, both handsome—Saxon beauty and Spanish—why are they not happy?"—for among all other gossip, she had not heard the fact that Lord Caraven had married for money, and not for love.

It was a pleasant evening. The earl found out another accomplishment of his wife's—she was an almost perfect musician; she sang like one inspired. The love, the passion, the tenderness, that found no vent in her ordinary life, found vent in song. The rich, low, contralto voice was more beautiful than anything he had ever heard. She sang like one whose whole soul is tuned to song. She had set to sweet, sad music, the poet's passionate words:

"O cruel love!"—she changed her tone—
"O cruel love, whose end is scorn!"

Is this the end, to be left alone,
To live forgotten, and die forlorn?"

She sang them with such sweet pathos. It was of herself she was thinking. Who was more forlorn than she—who more neglected?

"O cruel love, whose end is scorn!"

"What charming music!" said Lady Courtenay. "Whose is it? I do not remember to have heard it before, and I am familiar with most modern songs—whose is it?"

"My own," replied Hildred. "Whenever words please me very much, they always set themselves to music in my own mind."

"The words are so sad—'To live forgotten, and die forlorn!' How can they please one so young as you?"

"It is the fate of many," said Hildred, slowly.

"It may be, but it will never be yours—you, Countess of Caraven, young, gifted, beloved."

"There are many ways of dying," said Hildred. "It is more bitter than death to some to live without love; yet many live without it."

"You have strange thoughts for one of your age. I should have imagined that dresses and jewels, balls and dances, would have been in your thoughts rather than sad ideas of life and love."

"Should you? I like balls and dances very much," said Hildred, trying to speak lightly—she had no great desire to reveal to a stranger the secrets of her life and heart.

"You never told me," said Lord Caraven to his wife, "that you could sing so beautifully."

"Did I not? Perhaps you never asked me if I could sing at all."

"I do not remember doing so," he said. "Have you any more such surprises?"

She looked up at him brightly.

"You seemed half-horrified when I told that I could speak German," she said. "I was afraid that you considered accomplishments something to be concealed. I shall never tell you any of mine."

With a glance half-laughing, half-haughty, she took up the sheet of music and crossed the room. Lady Courtenay looked curiously into the face of the earl.

"Had you never heard your wife sing, really?" she asked.

"No, I had not, indeed," he replied.

"If I were a man and had wooed so sweet a songstress, I should have spent long hours over the piano," she said. "I thought you always liked music so much?"

"So I do. But I did not even know my wife could sing; she makes no parade of her talent."

"No," said Lady Courtenay to herself, "nor do I think that you have made any great parade of your love."

But she said no more—the subject was evidently not pleasing to the earl.

CHAPTER XII

"FATE IS WHAT PEOPLE MAKE IT—I WILL MAKE MINE"

A beautiful evening in October; it was as though some of the warmth and sweetness of summer had returned for a while. The sky was blue, the colors of the sunset were gorgeous, the foliage of the trees was magnificent; autumn flowers were blooming, autumn tints were over the land. The day had been unusually warm and sunny. Lord Caraven had invited some friends to dinner; as they lived at some little distance, and they could not remain for the night, dinner was ordered earlier than usual. It was only twilight when the guests drove away, and Lord Caraven, having no one to play at billiards with him, sauntered restlessly through the rooms, thinking to himself how foolish he had been not to provide himself with a companion for that most interesting of all games.

"I must not let this happen again," he said. "To live here alone requires more strength of mind than I am possessed of."

It did not occur to him that he was not alone—that he had a fair young wife near him. He never thought of her at all. He would not have remembered her existence but that, wandering aimlessly along the terrace, he saw her in the drawing-room.

He almost owned to himself that there could not have been a lovelier picture. Wishing to finish something she was reading, she had brought her book to the window and crouched down where the light fell. He saw a fair, flower-like face, a shining wealth of dark hair in which lay gleaming pearls, a flowing mass of purple velvet upon which the white arms shone like snow on a purple crocus; the lovely figure, the graceful attitude, the picturesque dress, cut square in the front, leaving the white neck bare, the wide hanging sleeves, the slender white hands—all made a picture that he must have admired had the subject been any other than the money-lender's daughter.

Seeing her, he thought it was possible she understood something of billiards although "women never knew anything useful." She saw him, and fancying from his manner that he wished to speak to her, she opened the window and went out to him.

"You will be cold," he said, with unusual thoughtfulness.

She went back to the drawing-room in search of a silvery scarf that she used. She threw it carelessly over her head and shoulders, where it looked so picturesque, and became her so well that he could not help noticing it.

"This is dull work, being here alone," he said.

"It is dull for both of us," she replied briefly.

"Ah, yes! Do you know I had quite forgotten you were alone as well. You must find it dull too. We will ask some nice people down at once; this kind of thing will never do. I wanted to ask you, do you know anything of billiards?"

"Billiards?" she repeated, wonderingly.

"Yes—many ladies play remarkably well. Lady Courtenay does. It is such a great resource."

"Do you want me to play with you?" she asked, quickly.

"Yes; I am bored to death. I am tired of smoking, I never read much, and there is nothing to do!"

"Extraordinary," she cried—"nothing to do!"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean nothing. I am very sorry. I have seen a billiard-table; but I have never played. I will try to learn, if you like."

"Beginners are generally very awkward," he said, frankly. "I cannot think how it is that I have forgotten to ask anyone over. I must not be so remiss again."

"Do you never amuse yourself?" she asked.

"No. How can I? I am essentially a sociable being. I feel little interest in myself."

"You would rather be amused than interested?" she asked.

He thought for half a minute before he answered.

"I see," he said. "Yes, I prefer amusement to anything else."

"It is a great pity that you cannot imitate the kings of old, and keep a court jester with cap and bells."

Lord Caraven looked at her. It could not surely be possible that this wife of his, this money-lender's daughter, was presuming to be satirical with him.

They walked down the terrace until they reached a rustic garden seat, and, with an air of utter exhaustion,

the earl sat down. Hildred took her seat, unasked, by his side.

The night wind was sweeping round them, bending the tall chrysanthemums, stirring the dying leaves—a sweet, fresh wind that was as odorous as balm. The twilight was fast fading, the birds had long since ceased to sing, there was a pleasant, brooding sense of rest and of freshness.

"This is almost as good as a billiard table," said Hildred, laughingly; but the earl shook his head.

"It may be for you," he replied, "but it is not for me."

"Lord Caraven," said Hildred, "a thought has just struck me. We have been married—how long? since the third of August, and it is now October; and do you know that you have never once addressed me by name? My schoolfellows used to call me 'Dreda,' my father calls me 'Hildred.' You have so contrived as never to give me any name at all. You do not say 'Lady Caraven,' 'Hildred,' 'wife,' or anything of the kind. How is it?"

"I cannot tell," he replied, blankly. The question had evidently puzzled him.

"I do not expect you would ever care to use any pretty, familiar, loving name; but do you not think you might learn to use my own? Lady Courtenay used to look at me, when you addressed me in that general kind of way as 'you.' Could you not say 'Hildred?'"

"I—I really do not know," he replied, "it is an uncomfortable kind of name—'Hildred.'"

She raised her charming head with a haughty little gesture.

"Do you fancy so? I think you do not know what 'uncomfortable' means. I am rather proud of my name; it may be quaint, but it is not common. If you cannot say 'Hildred,' can you not call me 'Lady Caraven?' I am tired of being spoken to so vaguely."

"I will not do it again, Lady Caraven, if it annoys you," he said; and then there was silence between them, broken only by the sighing of the wind.

Would he let this hour pass without speaking freely to her? They were alone now—there was no one to listen. Surely he would break the ice of reserve that was between them; surely he would say something to her at last. This unnatural state of things could not last much longer. Sitting there side by side, husband and wife, they were as strangers, with a great cloud between them. Would he speak to her now? Would he tell her why he was cold and reserved—why he never talked to her—why his wife was almost less than nothing to him? She could see no fairer chance than this. She raised her face, all bright with play of feeling, to his.

"Lord Caraven," she said, "will you be very angry with me if I ask you a question?"

"No; without knowing what the question may be, I predict that—certainly not."

"This question has troubled me very much; it has been the one thing which I have pondered night and day—a question I cannot answer, one that I feel is the key to a secret."

"You alarm me with that long prologue. Briefly, what is your question, Lady Caraven?"

"Briefly, it is this: Why did you marry me, Lord Caraven?"

"Why did I marry you?" he echoed, with astonishment.

"I ask you the question," she went on, "because I have watched you and studied you, and I am convinced at last that you did not marry me for love."

"Love!" he cried. "Why, what has that to do with it?"

"I thought," she continued, "that you had married me because you loved me. I knew that you were cold, undemonstrative, that you had no sympathy, little kindness; but I believed implicitly that you married me for love."

"I had never seen you—I saw you only once," he said, in astonishment.

"I know, I remember. Still, I repeat what I have said to you; I—I fancied—I am quite ashamed to tell you the truth, but I will do so—I fancied you had seen me somewhere and had liked me."

He laughed, but the laugh was not pleasant to hear.

"Did you really think that?" he asked, musingly. "Poor child!" Then he turned to her with sudden briskness. "Do you really mean to tell me, on your word of honor, that you do not know why I married you?"

She raised her fair, proud face to his.

"I assure you most solemnly that I do not. It is the greatest puzzle I have ever had."

"Did your father tell you that I—I loved you?"

"No," she replied, thoughtfully, "he did not. Indeed

he assured me that love was not needful for happiness. He never said you loved me—he said you wanted to marry me.”

“And what else? Go on. What else?”

“That it was a grand position, in which I should be supremely happy.”

“What else?” asked the stern voice.

“I hardly remember. That if I consented his highest ambition would be gratified.”

Lord Caraven murmured some terrible words between his closed lips.

“Then he never told you why this marriage was forced upon me?”

“Forced?” she interrogated, gently.

Perhaps the sudden paling of her lovely face startled him, or the sharp quiver of pain in her voice touched him.

“He—your father—never told you that he insisted on the marriage?”

“No, never,” she replied, faintly.

“He never told you that he made it my only refuge from him—my only hope—my only alternative?”

“No; he never told me that.”

“Then I will tell you now. He compelled me to marry you—and I begin to perceive that he has sacrificed you as well as myself ”

“Sacrificed us?” she repeated. “You cannot mean the word!”

“I do mean it, both for myself and you,” he replied. “I will tell you, Lady Caraven; it is right that you should know the truth. I have been a spendthrift and a prodi-

gal. I have squandered a large fortune and was deeply in debt. I owed your father the sum of sixty thousand pounds—I had mortgaged Ravensmere to him. I was also deeply in debt to others. I had literally come to my last shilling; disgrace, ruin, poverty and shame were all before me. Your father had the management of my affairs, and when I asked him what I was to do, he told me that he had two hundred thousand pounds and a daughter."

A low cry came from her lips, and she covered her face with her hands.

"I am sorry to pain you," he said—"sorry to distress you—but it is better that you should know the real truth. Your father is ambitious; his hopes were fixed on your marriage. He offered me the alternative—I could choose beggary, ruin, shame, disgrace, the total annihilation of my house and name, or I could choose the money and marry you. I told him that I did not feel inclined to marry, that I had no affection for you, and I implored him to find some other way out of the difficulty. He refused, and you know the result. Bear in mind, though, that I am most deeply grateful to you. Your fortune has saved me from worse than death. I am sorry to tell you this story; but it is best that you should know the truth."

"Yes," she agreed, despairingly, "it is best."

She drew her hands from her face and looked at him. What nature of man could he have been that the anguish and despair on that girlish face did not touch him?

"Then you have never loved me, never cared for me?" she said, faintly.

"No. I am grateful to you; I can say no more."

The words that had haunted her came back to her—"Let me die!"

He saw her draw the silvery shawl round her shoulders and shudder as though she were seized with violent cold.

"I feel now," he said, "that it was a cruel thing to do. You are young, and your whole life is blighted. At first I thought and believed that you understood everything—that you were as mercenary and ambitious as your father—that you were as ready as he to give yourself and your money in exchange for my title; I thought that you, through him, knew the full value of the estate and everything on it—that you knew all the house contained—that you were as keen and shrewd as he was. I misjudged you—I beg your pardon for it."

She raised her pale face to his.

"I swear to you," she said, "that I would rather have died than have married you had I known the truth."

"I believe it, and respect you for it. For some short time past I have fancied that in thinking as I did I was mistaken. Now I know it, and am glad to know it. I am sorry that you were sacrificed to me."

"Did you—do you—pray do not be angry with me," she said—"did you love anyone else?"

"I have been among fair women what a butterfly is among flowers," he replied. "I have loved, not one, but a hundred. I might say I have had as many loves as there are days in the year."

"But the one great love of your life—the love that is given only once—have you given that?" she asked.

"I understand. You ask me, in fact, if I had ever loved anyone sufficiently to ask her to be my wife. No, I had not. My loves were for the day, not for all time. I have never asked anyone to marry me, for the simple, all-sufficient reason that I have never seen anyone whom I should have cared to marry."

"And are you very unhappy with me?" she asked, gently.

"What a strange question! Unhappy? Well, no; I cannot quite say that. I am, as I said before, grateful to you; and now that I find you have been victimized, I am sorry for you."

"Do not be shocked if I ask you another question," she said, with down-dropped eyes and flushing cheeks. "Now that our marriage is an accomplished fact, do you not think that we might manage to make the best of it—might try to forget this wretched beginning? Could you never care even ever so little for me?"

He looked at her thoughtfully.

"I might deceive you—I might say 'Yes,' and play you false; but I will not. You are too good for that. No, not in the sense you mean; not to love you as a man should love his wife—never! You forgive me if these seem hard words—you have asked me for them."

"It is better to speak frankly; then we shall both know what we are doing."

She dropped the silvery veil that shrouded her head and face.

"Will you tell me," she asked, meekly, "why you

cannot care for me? Am I not fair enough to please you?"

"Yes, you are fair enough; but love is not to be taught or bought—it comes unperceived. I cannot express myself well on the subject; but it seems to me absurd for a man to say to himself, 'It is my duty to fall in love with such and such a woman, so I must do it.'"

"But if that woman were his wife?" she suggested, gently.

"No man can love against his will, wife or no wife," was the hasty reply.

"Then, Lord Caraven, am I to live in your house always an unloved, uncared-for wife?" she asked.

"The fault is not mine," he replied. "I believed that your father had explained to you that the whole affair was—was distasteful to me. Believing that, I married you; now that I have found out my mistake, I pity myself and I pity you, Lady Caraven. I despise myself now for what I have done. If I had to choose again, I should choose disgrace or death."

The night wind sighed around them, the sunlight had died away, the moon was rising in the sky.

"I am grateful to you," he continued. "I will do all I can to show my gratitude; you are and shall be mistress of the whole place. It is yours in so far as your money has saved it; you shall have every desire of your heart, every wish gratified. Your position is one of the highest in the land; you shall have everything to grace it; you shall have entire liberty; you shall invite whom you like, visit whom you like,

you shall go abroad when you will and remain at home when you will. You shall be your own mistress in every respect. I will always see that every honor is paid to you."

"In short," she said, "you will give me everything but love."

"Well, if you choose to put it in that light, yes."

"I accept the terms," she said, gently. "There are many women who have to find the happiness of their lives in the fulfillment of duty; I must do the same."

"You are a very sensible girl," commented Lord Caraven; "and I begin to think it is all for the best that we have had this conversation."

"I am sure of it; it will prevent my idealizing you in any kind of way, and I shall know better how to understand matters."

She raised her head with wondrous grace.

"It would be very strange," she added, "if you fell in love with me, after all. I am cold; I will say good evening. Pleasant reflections, my lord."

He saw the purple velvet and silvery veil disappear among the trees.

"It is a thousand pities that she is a money-lender's daughter," he said, "and a thousand pities that I cannot love her. She has plenty of character, and she is really handsome, although she is not my style."

Lady Caraven had gone to her rooms. She had felt keen, bitter shame while the revelation was made. That had passed away. After all, she was blameless. One man had been a spendthrift, the other was ambitious. Between them she was a helpless victim. She

tried to consider quite calmly what she should do.

Some girls, proudly indignant, would have left the house; others would have retaliated fiercely; others have grown sullen and revengeful. She was calm almost to heroism, although a more cruel position could not have been imagined. Even his open confession that he could never care for her had not quite destroyed her love. He was very frank—among his sins and imperfections deceit certainly could not be set down. Yet how different it all was from what she had thought it would be!

"I am quite sure of one thing," she said to herself. "It is almost cruel to write such stories as the histories of Lancelot and Elaine. What a difference between such men as the stainless knight and my husband! There are women living as fair, as tender, as lovely as Elaine; is there a man like Lancelot—like Lancelot before he loved 'the Queen?' Ah, me! if I could have had such love as his! But I must be content."

It seemed to her like an answer to an unspoken prayer, when she opened a book and saw these words of Carlyle—"Say unto all kinds of happiness, I can do without thee. With self-renunciation life begins."

That was to her new life—self-renunciation without happiness—life all duty, with no reward but the knowledge of itself.

"I can do it," said Hildred. "It is an uncommon fate—I can master it. It might break a weak heart, anger a proud one—it shall strengthen mine. Fate is what people make it—I will make mine."

Yet, brave as was the resolve, it was difficult to

carry out. Young, with life all before her, she longed for its blessings. It was not pleasant to remember that she had been bartered for a title—that she had been married solely for her money—that she possessed no charm for her husband—that he would always be profoundly indifferent to her. She remembered stories that she had read of the love that husband and wife had for each other—that it was the strongest, the truest, the dearest the world knew—and she told herself that such would never be hers. She remembered once having read that love of her husband was part of a wife's religion. Such love was never to be hers. She did not regret it. She could be brave and noble—she could do without it. But, nevertheless, she longed for it. It would seem strange to live always at Ravensmere, to have everything that her heart desired, to be wealthy, honored and great, yet to have no husband's love.

"One cannot have everything in this world," said the young countess to herself; "but I really think that, if I had been offered my choice, before all other gifts I should have chosen love."

CHAPTER XIII

"LOVE—A LIGHT, LAUGHING, GRACEFUL, AIRY COMEDY"

Three weeks had passed since the night on which Hildred had heard the true story of her marriage. She had tried hard to conquer the love for her husband which had begun to spring up in her heart. She tried hard to do her duty, to school herself in the knowledge that for her life she was to be without love. But it was hard. She was young and impressionable; the earl was handsome and fascinating. There were times when an irresistible impulse came over her—an impulse to beg him to love her. She resisted it, and every time she did so resist her heart grew colder and harder. It is difficult for a flower to blossom in a blighting cold; the buds droop, the perfume dies. It requires the warmth and brightness, the kisses and smiles of the sun to bring it to perfection. So it is with a half-formed character like Hildred's—the sunshine of love and happiness would have brought it to a fair and blooming maturity. The chill of neglect and indifference changed it.

One day Lord Caraven asked her if she would send out some notes of invitation for him, and Hildred asked him if he had a seal with his monogram on it.

"Yes," he replied. "It is somewhere in the drawers

of the escretoire in my study. Will you look for it, Hildred?"

Since her appeal to him he had always called her Hildred. He pronounced the name in a quick, hasty manner, as though anxious to get it over. She went to his study, and half smiled as she saw the utter confusion of his books and papers. He had followed her, and looked at her as she smiled.

"Man's untidiness is proverbial," she said, "but this surpasses all that I have seen. It must be quite impossible for you to find anything in this confusion."

"It is difficult," he owned; "but then you see I seldom want to find anything. I have often thought that that escretoire should be cleared out; the drawers are filled with locks of hair and love letters."

"Locks of hair?" she repeated, looking at him aghast.

"Yes, love trophies of all kinds. There must be a latent fund of sentiment somewhere in my heart. I never could destroy them. You will find every variety of hair there—from sunniest auburn to darkest brown. You will find flowers as faded as the love of the hour which made them precious. I could not destroy my love tokens, so I have kept them."

"They do not concern me," she said, with cold dignity. Do as she would, love would always be a sacred subject to her. She could never fall into a light fashion of discussing it—never. Nor did she care to hear others so discuss it,

"See," said the earl; "here are photographs enough for an album. Charming actresses, 'blue stockings,'

fair debutantes—I have begged a portrait from each."

"And have discarded it as soon as you have received it. I would not give you my portrait or a lock of my hair for the whole world!" she cried, angrily.

Lord Caraven laughed.

"Would you not? How proud you are, Hildred!"

"You are heartless," she replied. "Are all men like you? Do they pretend to love women just to amuse themselves, and then 'laugh and ride away?' Do they all cease to value a heart as soon as it is won, and sneer at the love which they have sought? Are they all faithless and insincere, cold and cruel?"

"I do not know, Hildred—I can only answer for myself. I am all that you say, and a little more."

"Where did the poets get their ideas from?" she asked. "Surely not from the men of the present day. I used to believe in heroes."

"Used you? I believe in very little. Have you found the seal?"

With a proud flush on her face she closed the drawer.

"I refuse to look any further," she said. "I detest your love trophies, as you call them—I will not soil my fingers by touching them."

The earl laughed—her sweet, womanly indignation amused him, she looked so charming in her anger.

"Did all those—those women from whom you won love trophies—did they all believe you?" she asked.

"Believe me? In what way?" he asked.

'Believe that you loved them when you said so?' she replied.

"I do not know—I hope not. You must remember, Hildred, that everyone is not so terribly in earnest as you are. In the world love is a comedy—men and women act their part in it, and retire with a laugh and a bow; with you it would be a tragedy, all fire and earnestness. The world would be unendurable if everyone were as earnest as you are."

"It would be worse still if everyone were as light and faithless as you are," she told him.

"Nay, Hildred," he laughed again, "I am not faithless. You do not understand—you have old-fashioned ideas about love. Suppose, now, that I go to a ball, and that I meet there the loveliest girl that ever drove a man to distraction with her smiles. I fall in love with her—I ask for a flower that she has worn. I elect her queen of my heart. I linger by her side, loath to leave her. We dance, we talk; we agree that we have never spent so pleasant an evening. I am hopelessly in love, and she is affable. I win a love token from her—a flower or a glove—perhaps kiss her white hand. Three days afterward I have forgotten her name and she perhaps barely remembers mine. That is the world's love—a light, laughing, graceful, airy comedy. You would have it a tragedy, filled with sighs and tears. There is no place for such love in this laughing world of ours. A butterfly kisses a rose, caresses a lily, lingers on the sweet-scented carnation, hovers round the mignonette—there you have a true picture of love as the world knows it."

She looked at him steadily, her dark eyes all eloquent with sweet, womanly thoughts.

"I am very glad, Lord Caraven," she said, with quiet, contemptuous dignity, "that you do not love me."

He laughed again, a little uneasily this time.

"Have you found the seal?" he asked. "These notes must go."

"No—and I do not intend to look for it. All the perfumes of Arabia would not purify those drawers for me." She turned to quit the room—he looked after her.

"Hildred!" he cried.

But she did not turn back—she walked straight on. He laughed again to himself, but again the laugh was not a pleasant one.

"What a spirit!" he said. "She says that she would not have my love, and I believe it. She is terribly in earnest. Those dark-haired women generally are—they never treat life as a bagatelle."

"Lord Caraven," said Hildred, one day soon after this little scene, "who is the person—gentleman, I should say, perhaps—who comes here so often?"

"Do you mean John Blantyre, my faithful friend and steward?" he asked, laughingly. "He comes every day."

"Is that his name? I do not like his face."

"Why not, Hildred?" he asked.

"It is not the face of an honest man, unless nature has for once made a mistake in her own handwriting."

"It is not a handsome face certainly," said the earl.—"far from it."

"I am not speaking of mere beauty of feature—and perhaps I judge him harshly," she replied. "But it

does not seem to me an honest face. I would not trust the man for—Do you trust him, Lord Caraven?"

"I trust him implicitly—indeed I do not believe I have ever overlooked his accounts."

She looked at him in wonder.

"Never overlooked his accounts! How very careless of you!" she said.

"I am not careful by nature," he told her, laughingly.

"But," she observed, earnestly, "such carelessness is wrong. You put a terrible temptation in his way by not keeping a check upon him."

"I suppose," said Lord Caraven, indolently, "that I find it easier to let myself be robbed a little than to look after matters for myself."

The dark, eloquent eyes that were raised to his expressed a great deal.

"What do you do with your life?" she asked. "It seems to me that you have no idea of duty."

"Nor have I. I know well what to do with my life—I enjoy it."

"There can be nothing more to add," said Hildred. "But if I were you, Lord Caraven, I should look after my accounts."

She thought a great deal after that conversation. It had opened her eyes more fully to her husband's character than anything that had passed before. At first she had been somewhat dazed by the novelty of her position. She had been inclined to fall very deeply in love with her handsome young husband. She had idealized him—she had tried to make a hero of him.

The very novelty of her position hid his faults from her. She had even at times mistaken indolence for ease. But her eyes were slowly opening now. She began to perceive that although some good qualities might be innate in him, they were overlaid with selfishness and long habits of self-indulgence. Indeed, it was difficult to tell what his original nature had been. She began to perceive that his character resembled a garden which had been sown with the fairest of flowers, but which had afterward been choked by the foulest of weeds. She decided to study him.

Was he generous? She thought at first that she might say "Yes." They were riding out one day, and they met a poor woman begging, with a little child in her arms. She was poor, hungry, all in tatters, with pinched face, and sad, weary eyes—a pitiful spectacle of want and destitution. As they passed by, the earl took out his purse and literally emptied it on the ground at the woman's feet. She looked dazed and bewildered at this sudden bounty of fortune. He did not wait for any thanks, but rode on.

"I wish," he said, "that I could collect all the poor people in the world together and make them rich."

"Was that generosity?" she said to herself.

Yes, it must be. She did not think of the luxurious, ease-loving nature that shrank selfishly from seeing pain in others, that would fain have kept all painful, sorrowful objects out of sight, that shrank from the sight of suffering as it would have shrunk from pain. She did not think of this disposition or make any allowance for it when she pronounced her husband generous.

They rode on until they came to a small cottage—one belonging to the Ravensmere estate—at the door of which stood a man still young, but crippled and bent double with rheumatism. A little cry of pain came from Hildred's lips as she saw him, but the young man's eyes were fixed with an evil light on the earl's face.

Hildred stopped to say a kind word to him; the cripple came out and stood in front of the earl's magnificent horse.

"My lord," he said, in a hoarse voice, "I have you to thank for these"—pointing to his shrunken limbs—"and for these, also"—pointing to his useless hands.

"What do you mean?" Lord Caraven demanded, his face flushing with anger.

"I mean this, my lord—that I was a strong young man when I took this cottage and brought my wife home here; now," he cried, in a sudden passion of despair—"now look at me!"

"What have I to do with that?" asked the earl, angrily.

"This much, my lord—I spent all my bit of money on this land; I had none left for repairing the house—your house, my lord. The water came in at the roof and at the windows—the wind blew through the doors. I begged to have it repaired—I have sent more letters than I could count to agent and landlord. Neither has attended to me. If I had had the money, I would have done it myself; but I had not. I have had a sick wife and sick children, but never a shilling to spare for the broken roof, and your heartlessness has reduced me to this."

"Stand aside!" said the earl, angrily; "you men are never contented—never satisfied—stand aside!"

"My lord," cried the man, "the horses in your stables, the dogs in your kennels, are better cared for than I—they are better housed. If I die"—and his voice changed to a cry of despair—"my death be upon your head!"

"You are an impertinent fellow!" cried the earl. "Out of my way, or I will ride over you!"

"Pray—pray listen to him, Lord Caraven," cried Hildred.

But the earl turned angrily to her.

"You do not understand these matters; you must not interfere," he said—"a set of idle rogues!"

"Stop, my lord," cried the man, his face paling—"stop. Be satisfied with taking my health and my strength—leave my character alone. I am no rogue; I am an honest, hard-working man."

"Honest, indeed!" cried the earl. "There is not one honest man among you."

The evil look deepened on the man's pale face.

"I will not answer, my lord," he said, with quiet dignity. "I am asking a favor; it is life to me. I have no money to leave the house. If I remain in it as it is, it will be certain death to me. My lord, it is but a few pounds—very few—do not refuse them."

But Lord Caraven's face grew crimson with anger.

"I shall do nothing of the kind. And let me tell you that I consider it a great piece of impertinence for you to stop me in this fashion; I have an agent to manage my affairs—go to him. Out of my

road, and take care, that you do not stop me again."

The man went away, and the earl rode on. Was he generous? Only a few pounds, and for that a life must be sacrificed!

"Mind, Hildred," he said, sharply, "you are not from any mistaken notion of generosity to interfere; if you do, I shall have to repair every house on the estate."

And she wondered to herself whose idea of generosity was mistaken—his or hers.

CHAPTER XIV

"I AM A FORTUNATE MAN"

Hildred's heart sank lower and lower—every day brought her some fresh revelation of her husband's character which was utterly unendurable to her. The worst trait of all was that he seemed to her, as it were, to lounge through life. He literally did nothing—no useful occupation ever seemed to attract him. He never read—he never wrote. If any letter of importance required an answer, he passed it to her, or threw it aside. If the agent brought the accounts, he said, in his indolent manner: "Lay the books down—I will see to them soon;" but he never looked at them. He had but one idea, and that was amusement. No idea of work ever seemed to occur to him—self-indulgence and indolence were all that he cared for.

Hildred's heart sank in dismay. She looked at him sometimes as he lay listlessly stretched on a couch, and wondered why nature had given so fair an exterior to one with so little soul. The handsome face seemed to have no purpose in it. If he spoke, it was always about some plan or other for his own especial amusement—it was either of billiards or of one of the games in which he took such infinite delight. He never advanced any scheme for the benefit of others; in fact

other people, except so far as they ministered to his pleasures and his will, did not exist for him. He was a hopeless character—far more hopeless than that of a man of graver faults. His young wife looked at him sometimes wondering if anything would ever interest him, would ever rouse him, would ever stimulate him to action.

"It is a terrible thing," she said; "to live so entirely for one's self—a terrible thing."

She thought to herself once that she would sketch his day. He never rose until after ten; he sat for some time over his breakfast, reading his letters and newspapers. The former were thrown aside, and seldom, if ever, answered; even those of importance were ignored like the rest. There was generally a muttered word over the bills, if any came. Then he took a gallop on his horse wherever his wild fancy led. That was followed by luncheon, when his lordship did not spare his wine; after that came billiards or cards, if anyone worth playing with was in the house. Dinner was followed by wine and billiards until the early hours of the morning. It was not a noble life, it was not even a dignified life—it had no end, no aim, no object except self-indulgence, and the young wife looked on in sorrowful dismay.

Would he never change? Would he remain selfish, self-indulgent, indolent, to his life's end? The contrast between what he did and what he should have done appalled her—she hardly dared to think of it. The estate was neglected and uncared for; the tenants were oppressed; appeals for mercy and for justice

were made to him in vain. The farmers were all dissatisfied; the only person who really seemed to approve of matters as they stood was John Blantyre, the steward, the man whom Lady Caraven instinctively disliked. He was always smiling, bland, suave; he had a habit, while talking to Lord Caraven, of rubbing his hands—a habit that used to annoy and to irritate the young countess exceedingly. He was quite pleased if threats were made by the servants and laborers that they would appeal to the earl. He had a fashion of saying, "You can try it—you will see what the earl says;" for the earl had but one answer to everything—complaint, excuse, or prayer—and it was, "Go to Blantyre;" indeed, the order had become quite a by-word on the estate, "Go to Blantyre" being considered as equivalent to something far more dreadful.

The young countess looked around her. On every side she saw the same evil—nothing was attended to, nothing done; the indolent ease of the earl seemed to extend to everyone with whom he came in contact. The servants were continually being changed; nothing went right, as nothing does when the master of the house takes no interest in anything that passes in it.

Another thing distressed her. She saw that his old love of gambling was returned in full force. There were times when his face grew very dark over his betting-book; and he would leave home on all the great race-days, remaining away for some time, and returning home indolent, more selfish than ever.

Time had familiarized him with her presence in the

house; but it was seldom that he took any special notice of her, seldom that he spoke to her. As for any display of kindness or love, it was out of the question.

It was a dreary fate. She tried to bear it bravely, to store up golden knowledge and wisdom; but at eighteen, when the heart longs for love, and the fair opening life craves for its full enjoyment, it is difficult to live on knowledge and wisdom. She strove hard; she told herself that marriage was irrevocable—that hers could never be undone. The only thing that remained was to make the best of it. How to do that was now the great study of her life. She found herself opposed on all sides. If she attempted to ask the earl anything about the people on his estate, the answer always was, "Go to Blantyre." As she neither liked nor trusted Blantyre, she never condescended to ask him a single question.

"My life is empty," she would say. "I might almost as well be dead as living."

No more painful life could have been imagined. Ravensmere was gay enough; they saw plenty of visitors, they had balls and dinner-parties; their visitors were gay, worldly, brilliant people who came to enjoy themselves for a few days, and did not care to enter into the cares and trials of their hostess. With them she was gay and brilliant—she would show nothing of the anguish that never left her; they should not go away and talk about "Lady Caraven, the wife whom her husband did not love," whatever it cost her and the effort was at times terrible.

The earl saw her only at those times, and he smiled significantly.

"Women have no heart," he said, scoffingly. "This girl is just as happy as though she had the most loving husband in the world. She has what she wanted, and she seems to enjoy it, too."

Of the noble womanly pride that disdained all complaint, of the brave spirit that fought so resolutely with her longing for happiness and her longing for love, he never even dreamed. To him she was a girl content with her fate—a girl who enjoyed her title, her position, her gayeties, who did not look beyond them, who cared nothing that she was a neglected, widowed wife. Had anyone told him the contrary he would not have believed it; he would have said it was a misconception. She looked very nice at the head of his table—very handsome, very graceful; she could sing like a nightingale; she never interfered with him. What more could he wish for?

"I begin to think," said the handsome earl to himself one day, "that I have not done so badly after all. If I had married for love, or anything of that kind, what trouble I should have had, what reproaches and tears—and a woman's tears! I would sooner face untold hardships. I should have had all the uncertainties of love; now I am spared it all, and my house is presided over by a queenly mistress. Taking everything into account, I consider I am a fortunate man."

So he said in his blindness; but the time was to come when he would awaken from that blindness with sudden passionate pain.

When the month of May came round he decided upon going to London. Halby House was prepared for them, and the handsome earl's friends made ready to receive him with open arms. He had been welcome in his penniless state, and, having married a wealthy heiress, he was now doubly welcome. Those who had won money from him before looked forward to winning more; those who had gambled and betted with him before, looked forward to a renewal of those delights. He would be welcome.

The *elite* of the fashionable world were not sorry to receive their favorite again. The rumor that Halby House was to be thrown open, that the young Countess of Caraven was very beautiful, that the earl's revived prosperity would enable him to vie with the best party-givers in London, was good news. The only one indifferent to it was the young countess herself—and she would fain have hidden her sorrows from all eyes and remained at Ravensmere.

CHAPTER XV

"DIED OF NEGLECT"

Halby House was, as rumor said, one of the most magnificent mansions in London. It had been closed for some years, the earl's affairs not permitting his residence there. Now circumstances were different. Arley Ransome—to whom this spring was to bring the keen enjoyment of his ambition—had undertaken to have it redecorated and refurnished. He had gratified the earl by begging that he would leave the matter entirely to him; it would delight him, he said, to place so valuable a present in his daughter's hand as a wedding gift. The earl laughed indolently.

"It is rather late in the day for a wedding gift," he said, "but do just as you like."

Arley Ransome did just as he liked; he enjoyed it very much. He had the pleasure of going to the best shops in London and ordering all kinds of things for "my daughter, Lady Caraven"—"my daughter, the Countess of Caraven."

It was a poor ambition for a clever man; but it was his, and he had gratified it at the cost of his daughter's happiness. That mattered little to him; he was father-in-law to the Right Honorable, the Earl of Caraven—he was the father of the beautiful Countess of

Caraven. What this did for him, how it advanced his interests, he best knew.

Halby House was talked about for its splendor and magnificence; even before the earl and countess came to town crowds of people went to see it. It was considered a triumph of art. The earl had not asked his young wife if she would go up to town; he had taken her consent for granted. He knew that she must be presented—that, if he failed in that duty, Arley Ransome would be indignant; and he was fairly caught in the toils. He was not particularly ashamed of his wife; he was not proud of her; but he had ceased to feel annoyed by the reflection that he had married a money-lender's daughter. The Duchess of Morley was to present her; and, once under the shadow of her grace's protection, a triumph was sure to follow.

A proud day for Arley Ransome was that of his daughter's presentation at court. He drove to Halby House to see her before she went, and to him his daughter looked like a miracle of beauty. Full dress enhanced her loveliness wonderfully; her neck, arms and shoulders were beautifully molded, and they were shown to the greatest advantage, as was the perfect, rounded figure. The court-dress was one of unusual magnificence—a silver brocade elaborately trimmed with rich lace. She wore a parure of diamonds; the waving plumes that lend so grotesque an aspect to some faces gave her an air of majesty. The lovely Spanish face and dark eyes were a study in themselves.

She was alone with her maids in her dressing-room when Arley Ransome came. He sent up a little penciled note, saying:

"Hildred, can you come into the drawing-room for a few minutes? I want to see you in your court-dress."

There was no elation in her heart as she raised her magnificent train in her hand and threw it over her arm. She went downstairs grave, collected, almost sad.

Arley Ransome started as she entered. Then he made a low bow.

"My dear Hildred," he said, "I congratulate you. How beautiful you look! You were born to be a countess."

"Then I was born to very little purpose," she replied, hastily.

He would not notice the petulant reply.

"I must repeat that you look very beautiful, indeed, my dear child," he said. "I am surprised—gratified."

"I am glad that you are pleased," she replied. He was her father, and she was compelled to honor him; but she felt that she could never forgive him for having sold her—sold her for a title.

"I think, my dear," said Arley Ransome, nervously, "that it would be quite as well if you could try to—to look a little brighter. You do not look happy. How is it?"

"Did you ever expect that I should be happy, papa?"

"Of course. Most certainly you have everything to make you so."

She made no reply. The lawyer's eyes glistened with keenest satisfaction as he looked at her.

"It is a proud day for me," he said—"the day on which I see my daughter in her court-dress. Throw down the train; let me see the full effect."

Without a smile on her face she complied, standing before him calm, beautiful, self-possessed. At that moment the earl, not knowing she was there, entered the room. He started at the lovely apparition.

"Hildred, I did not know that you were here. You are ready, I see."

"Quite ready," she replied, briefly.

"Then we will start at once," he said.

Arley Ransome went up to him.

"You must feel pleased and proud," he said. "The most beautiful woman presented to-day will be your wife. I predict for her a signal triumph."

"Which will add considerably to my domestic happiness," remarked the earl.

Yes, he was pleased. He saw people whose opinions he valued turn to look at his wife; he heard her name whispered; he saw admiring glances follow her; he felt that among fair pink-and-white English girls she looked like some southern queen. But the knowledge of all this did not in the least warm his heart to her. And she? She had ceased to feel any great interest in his opinion. The time had been when she would perhaps have stood before him, and have said, "I hope you are pleased with me, Lord Caraven." She would not now; she was proudly, superbly indifferent. Indeed she would have given much for the impulse, the desire to please him. It had faded away—died of neglect.

There was no prouder woman at the queen's drawing-room than the money-lender's daughter, the unloved, neglected wife of the handsome earl. How little she dreamed of the splendid pageant when she

was at St. Roche, thinking only of study! How little she had thought that at some time or other she would be a countess—Countess of Caraven—that she would be taken to court by a grand and stately duchess.

"I wish," she said, with a sigh, "that I were at St. Roche again. There life was bright, because it was full of possibilities; the possibilities are all accomplished now, and it is bright no longer."

For a few minutes she forgot her troubles, when she stood before the queen. Then there was a crush, a mingling of smiles and sighs, and the drawing-room was over.

Arley Ransome was a proud man that day. He intended his daughter to be his stepping-stone to honor. The handsome earl was not at all elated—he heard all that people had to say about the beauty of his wife, but he did not place much faith in it. To him she would always be the unformed school-girl of the Hollies. When anyone praised his wife, he thought it was done to please him; and he laughed cynically to himself, knowing how mistaken they were.

He wondered a little what his wife thought of her great success. It struck him that he would ask her. He reached home at the same time that she did, and followed her to the drawing-room, thinking as he looked at her how grave and earnest was her face.

"How did you feel through it all, Hildred?" he asked.

"Something like a daw in borrowed plumes," she replied. "I do not think I shall care very much about your great world, Lord Caraven. I do not think it is

such a great pleasure to be of it. I think it is quite possible that many would be civil to the Countess of Caraven who would have wasted little kindness on Hildred Ransome."

"There you are right," he said.

"I do not care for your great world, then. I know worlds higher and greater—I would sooner belong to them."

"Yet it is something to be Countess of Caraven," said the earl.

And his wife's sigh was the only response to his words.

CHAPTER XVI

"A FALSE, UNNATURAL LIFE"

The people of the great world did not quite understand Lady Caraven. She was among them, but not of them. In crowded ball-rooms, in the opera-house, at garden-parties and where the lovers of fashion congregated, her noble, beautiful face, with its look of proud reserve, appeared out of place. She was very popular—very much liked—but not quite understood. Fair ladies whose lives were one gay round of pleasure wondered why smiles did not come as readily to her lips as to theirs—why she was graver, more thoughtful, more abstracted.

It was so strange a life; the world around her was so brilliant, so gay, there seemed no room in it for anything but laughter and song. There were times when she looked wonderingly at the bright faces of others, crying from the depths of her soul:

"My heart is empty!"

The tender, loving human heart was empty. She had loved her father very dearly, and he had sold her to the handsome earl for a title—for the gratification of a paltry ambition. She had tried to love her husband and he had amused himself by telling her of his conquests—he had frankly owned that he did not care for her and that he never should. Her heart was

empty. It was too noble to be filled with frivolity. She might have turned to that refuge for the destitute, flirtation; she might have thrown herself into the giddy vortex of the world—into the whirlpool of gayety; she might have lived on excitement. But she was too noble for any of these things—she could not have consented to them.

"What shall I do with my life?"

The cry that arises from so many aching hearts now arose from hers. She had no one to love, no one to care for—the very duties that might have occupied her were taken from her—and something of all this was told in the beautiful young face. She had many sad thoughts. No one was more popular in society than the handsome earl; but people were quite alive to his failings, which were never treated very seriously—the rumor that he had lost a few thousands on the turf, a few hundreds at the gaming-table, was generally received with a smile. He was "faithless and light of heart," he never sighed over his misfortunes, and the world loved the smiling fashion in which he bore them.

People had not made up their minds as to whether he loved his beautiful girl-wife, and Hildred often heard remarks not intended for her ear. One evening she was standing behind a group of ladies in a crowded ball-room, and she heard her own name.

"Have you seen Lady Caraven?" one asked another, and the answer was: "Yes, I have seen her. She is very beautiful; but she is a thousand times too good for the earl."

"Yes, it was a sacrifice," said the first speaker. "She does not look happy."

Again, she was in the crush-room one evening, when, feeling cold, she drew her opera-hood over her face, and she heard herself spoken of.

"The Countess of Caraven. Poor child, she is to be pitied!"

Why was it that people seemed to pity her? Did the whole world know that her husband had married her for her money and did not love her? She fancied it must be so—and that belief made her more retiring than ever.

One morning she was restless and could not sleep. She had been thinking about her strange lot in life until her head ached. The pillow was hot; she longed to be up and breathing the sweet, fresh morning air.

She touched the repeater; it was just four. She thought a book might soothe her, and was much interested in a new novel. She was always considerate about her servants. Many ladies would have rung for their maid, and have sent her for what they required; but Lady Caraven rose and put on her dressing-gown, intending to go to the drawing-room herself. Then the clear cold water in her dressing-room looked so tempting that she stopped and bathed her face and hands in it. She drew her wealth of dark hair behind her pretty shell-like ears. She had no thought of the lovely picture she presented—her beautiful face glowing with roses from the cold water, her hair falling in most picturesque disorder, the graceful lines and curves of her figure showing to greatest advantage.

She went downstairs, and was surprised to see the large lamp still burning in the hall. She thought it had been forgotten, and went forward with the intention of putting it out. To her still greater surprise, she saw Adolphe, her husband's valet, asleep in the great arm-chair. She spoke to him.

"Adolphe," she said, "what are you doing here? Why is this lamp still alight? It is morning."

The tired man-servant looked round him with an air of stupefaction for half a minute, then rose, and, seeing the young countess, grew puzzled and half alarmed. What was he to say if she repeated the question?

"What are you doing here?" she asked again.

He dared not say that he was waiting for his master; but, before he had time to reply, there came, fortunately, a knock at the hall door, and the next moment the earl stood before her. In amazement he looked at the vision before him.

"Hildred," he cried, "what are you doing here?"

"I came down to find a book, because I could not sleep, and, seeing the lamp burning, I intended to extinguish it."

Lord Caraven took out his watch.

"Four o'clock," he said. "I am late—or rather early. I have been playing at billiards since eleven."

She looked contemptuously at him.

"I believe," she said, "that your whole sou' is engrossed in billiards."

"I have played the best game to-night that I have ever played in my life," he told her, laughing.

She made no reply. He continued:

"I will quote a popular line—'If you're waking, call me early'—that is, some time after noon. We shall have a grand match at the club to-morrow evening, and I have staked a small fortune on the champion billiard-player of England."

Hildred looked at him—the handsome face was worn and haggard, the eyes were tired and dim. The picture was a striking one—the girl-wife in all the fresh beauty of her youth; the husband, still in his evening dress, haggard, pale, yet handsome even in his fatigue; the lovely light of the morning struggling with the garish light of the lamp.

Hildred spoke at last—the valet had discreetly disappeared.

"I had no idea that you stayed out so late," she said, gravely. "I do not think it is right."

"If I were you," returned her husband, "I would not waste any time in thinking about it. You know the old song:

"'The best of all ways to lengthen our days
Is to steal a few hours from the night, my dear.'"

"It must be hard for your servants," she said, "though perhaps very delightful to yourself."

"You forget our compact, Hildred," he said, his face clouding. "You go your way, and I go mine; but I will allow no interference; my outgoings and incomings have nothing to do with you—do not forget."

"I do not forget," she told him, haughtily.

"I will never allow anyone to make any comment

upon my actions," he said. "I please myself, and I always shall."

"I make no comment," rejoined his wife.

He recovered his good humor—it was impossible to look at her and do otherwise. "We both, it appears, steal a few hours from the night, but mine are taken from the beginning, yours from the end. Good morning, Hildred," and the next moment she was standing in the hall alone.

She went into the drawing-room and opened the shutters, letting in all the glory of the sunshine, all the fragrance of the morning air; she opened the windows and looked out at the tall green trees. How fair it was—this world on which she looked! The sky was glowing with crimson and gold, the dew lay shining on the grass, the western wind was fragrant with sweet odors.

Looking at the morning sky, she remembered her husband's handsome haggard face under the garish light of the lamp, and she turned away with a shudder. What a false, unnatural life it was! How she loathed it! She laid her head against the cool green leaves of the plants that half-filled the window, and, looking still at the morning skies, dreamed of the world, of life as it might have been—so different—ah, so different, if she had only married someone who loved her!

The beauty of the morning sky, the fragrance of the flowers, awoke in her heart a longing for love. If she had only married a husband who loved her—who would have talked to her, cared for her—who would

not have placed her outside his life, and have treated her as a stranger—she could have lived in the green heart of the land, away from the brilliant city; the sun would always have shone for her.

So thinking, so dreaming, she fell asleep with her head among the leaves, and the sun shining on her face.

When she awoke it was with a shudder, her dreams had all been of the earl's anger. She remembered the scene of the early morning.

"And now," she thought, "he will sleep until noon, and then play again until sunrise to-morrow. What a life! May heaven pardon us for the time we waste."

It was not until dinner-time the same day that she saw her husband again, and then he did not look very well pleased.

"Hildred," he said, sharply, "I hope you do not intend to repeat this morning's performance. If you want books, take them upstairs with you. It is like a scene from a French drama, to open the hall door, and find one's wife waiting there."

"It was quite an accident," she replied. "How can you imagine it to have been otherwise?"

He appeared rather ashamed of his harshness.

"I have heard so many stories," he said. "I thought, perhaps, that someone had been telling you that I spend whole nights at billiards, and that you wished to find out for yourself whether it was true."

"You do not understand me," she returned, haughtily, "if you think that I would allow anyone to speak evil of you to me."

He looked pleased.

"That is right," he said. "I see it was accidental. Do not let it occur again, Hildred. I should not like it. After all, you know, liberty of action is the one great thing. I will let no one interfere with mine."

"I can assure you, Lord Caraven," she answered, "that I, for one, shall never try to do so."

"That is right," he said. "If you keep to that we shall be good friends."

CHAPTER XVII

"I AM AN UNLOVED WIFE"

A week after this little incident Arley Ransome called to see his daughter; he wished to congratulate her on her success in society, to tell her all that he had heard in her praise, and how his most sanguine dreams were being realized. As the father of Lady Caraven, people thought it worth their while to conciliate him. He was invited to houses where, before this marriage, he had never hoped to enter; he had been made welcome in the drawing-rooms of Belgravia and Mayfair. What was even better, his practice was increasing. Arley Ransome was a happy man.

He was shown into the library, where the young countess sat alone, royally beautiful, in a close-fitting dress of black velvet—velvet that fell in rich folds and swept the ground around her. The charming head and face were set off by the dark drapery, she held a book in her hands, but she had not read one word it contained. She looked up when her father entered, and he was struck by the despondency of her young face, the weariness of her dark eyes, the drooping attitude. He went up to her, and, as usual, complimented her. She was looking so well, so beautiful, he must say, and what a success she had achieved.

No smile answered; the weariness and the despondency deepened. He took a seat by her side, and told her all that he thought would interest her most. Was she listening? He did not know, for she made no reply. Suddenly—and the shock of it quite startled him—she raised her eyes to his face.

"Father," she said, "do you know what manner of man this is to whom you have sold me?"

"My dear Hildred, hush! Pray be more guarded in your speech."

"I repeat, do you know what manner of man my husband is?"

"Oh! now you put the question in better form, I can answer it! You really should not use the word 'sold,' as though you were a slave; we do not sell people in England."

She laughed—surely, the most dreary, the saddest laugh that ever fell from such young lips.

"We will not dispute about a word, papa. Answer my question—do you know what manner of man my husband is?"

"I know that the earl is considered a very handsome, fascinating man by all who are acquainted with him," he replied.

"Handsome!" she repeated, sorrowfully. "What has that to do with it? Do you know that he is utterly incorrigible—that he spends his days and nights in playing and betting—that he comes home at sunrise—that he neglects every duty?"

"Little foibles, my dear," he replied, quickly; "you must not think too much of them."

She folded her hands, and they lay listlessly on her dress.

"Little foibles, papa? If men call those things little foibles, I should like to know what they consider great sins!"

"We will waive that, my dear—it is not a matter for discussion," said the lawyer, almost wishing that he had not called on that particular morning.

But she was not to be silenced.

"Did you know what he was when you allowed me to marry him?" she continued.

"I knew that he was Lord Caraven—and surely that was enough—a peer of the realm, a man of ancient descent."

"Did you know that he liked gambling and betting better than anything else in the world?" she asked.

"More foibles. All men have their weaknesses—those are his. You must have patience, my dear."

"Did you know," she continued, "that he does not even like me, and never did?"

"Nonsense, Hildred! You have all that you require," he said, hastily.

"And a dead heart," she murmured—"a dead heart! Papa, did you remember that I was young, and that youth lives on love?"

"Nonsense!" he replied. "You have grown sentimental through having nothing to do, Hildred."

"It was a cruel thing, this marriage. I was so young—I might have been spared. It was a cruel deed."

"My dear Hildred," said Arley Ransome, growing

alarmed, "I did not deceive you. I never told you that Lord Caraven loved you. He asked you to be his wife; there was nothing said about love."

"You told me that I could live without it," she said, in a low voice.

"I did," he assented.

She struck her hands together with passionate fervor.

"I cannot!" she cried. "Heaven help me, I cannot! My heart is empty, my heart is dead, my life is vain. You deceived me when you told me that. You, my father, who should have saved me—who should have taught me better—you deceived me, and I wish that I were dead!"

"You are very unreasonable, Hildred," he said, slowly.

"What have I to live for?" she cried. "I have no one to love me. My husband is a stranger to me; he values me less than his horse or his dog; he would not miss me if I died to-morrow; he has my money, he does not want me. There is no one in all this wide world so forlorn, so desolate as I am."

"You forget that I love you, Hildred."

"No, you never loved me, papa," she declared. "I am quite—"

"I am sure," interrupted Arley Ransome, "that Lord Caraven always seems kind to you."

"Kind!" she repeated. "He does not beat me; he is just as kind to his favorite dog as he is to me! Kind! That is not the relationship that should be between husband and wife; he does not love me, and

he never will. Think of that—remember how young I am, how lonely. How am I to live through the stretch of years? My husband, papa, rarely speaks to me; he never takes the least interest in me. I do not believe that if I fell dead at his feet he would attempt to raise me from the ground."

"You exaggerate, my dear; it will all come right in time," he said, soothingly.

"It will never come right for me, papa—and you know it."

With a passionate gesture she rose up from her seat. She went over to him and laid her hands on his shoulders. She raised her sad, beautiful face to his.

"Father," she said, "I am frightened at myself. I cannot tell—I dare not think—how it will end. I was indifferent at first, but now," she continued in a low tone, "I begin to dislike him."

"Oh, my dear, that is very wrong—very wrong, indeed! A woman should never dislike her husband!"

"Should a husband ever dislike his wife?" she asked. "Because my husband does dislike me. I am frightened at myself, for if I were to be here much longer I should hate him—hate him for his indolence, his self-indulgence, his weakness of character—hate him, because through him my whole life is spoiled."

"Hush, Hildred! I will not listen to you. You are unreasonable. You have everything that a woman's heart can wish for; you have position; you are surrounded with luxury; you have boundless wealth. What more can you want?"

"I have all that, and I am an unloved wife. I have

all that, yet I would change places with the poorest peasant woman whose husband loves her."

"That sounds well, my dear, but were you to try it, you would soon change your opinion. Now, be reasonable, Hildred. Be content with what you have; do not long for what you have not. I wonder at your want of reason—your want of sense. You are like a child crying for the moon. How many girls in England would have been glad of the chance to be Countess of Caraven."

"I hate the title!" she said, with a stamp of the foot.

"You are in a passion, Hildred. You are not yourself to-day. I am sorry that I called."

With an imploring gesture she held out her hands to him.

"Can you do nothing to help me, papa—nothing?"

He looked embarrassed and perplexed.

"What can I do, my dear? I can speak to Lord Caraven, but I have grave doubts as to whether that will improve matters. It is never a wise thing to interfere between husband and wife. I could ask him to take just a little more interest in you, if you like."

"No!" she cried vehemently. "You do not understand. I mean, help me that I may not hate him—help me that I may be more patient. If I hated him, I should be compelled to leave him—and I am drawing near it fast."

"You must not, Hildred. I am sure he is very lovable."

"But then you see papa," she objected, "he does not love me."

"He will do so in time. Everyone likes Lord Caraven. He is called 'the handsome earl.' I assure you, Hildred, that there is not a woman in London who would have refused him, not one."

"I wish that I had refused him," she said, dreamily. "Papa, I am so frightened at myself. Do you know that I do not want him to love me now? I am beginning to dislike him—the sound of his voice is positively unpleasant to me. I would far rather be broken-hearted, longing for his love, than be what I am now. I should be a better woman if I wept for his love, instead of feeling as I do now that it is not worth having. My better self is dead."

"My dear Hildred, all this is most absurd. You do not know what you want. You tell me that your husband does not love you—you make that the groundwork of your complaint—and then you tell me you cannot regret his want of love. The fact is, my dear, you are not yourself—you are over-tired. After your quiet life at St. Roche, all this excitement is too much for you. I should advise you to keep quiet for a few days, and then you will be all right."

The tragedy of sorrow seemed to pass from her face.

"Thank you, papa," she replied. Her hands tell insistently. "You speak as you think. It is not your fault that you do not understand me. We will say no more about it."

"That is right," said Arley Ransome, looking great.

ly relieved. "Now you speak like a reasonable woman. Philosophers say that women have impulse but no reason—I shall begin to think that they are wrong."

He talked with his usual brisk cheerfulness about many indifferent subjects, and then took his leave. But, although he had silenced his daughter, he was not disposed to allow this kind of thing to continue, if he could help it. It would end badly—his own knowledge of the world told him that. So he called at the earl's club, and there he found him as usual.

"I have just been to Halby House," he said, "and have been spending half an hour with Hildred."

The earl raised his eyebrows, which was the only mark of interest he thought it worth his while to bestow.

"I did not think that she looked very well, and, what was worse, she did not appear happy."

"Women never do unless they have new diamonds every day," declared the earl.

"I do not think that Hildred requires new diamonds; but I think perhaps that if you—"

"I," interrupted the earl—"I have nothing to do with it. I have a nervous dread of people who do not look happy. Pray do not appeal to me. Hildred is all right—I see nothing to complain of."

"I should not like to see anything that called for complaint," said Arley Ransome, sternly.

"Speak frankly," cried Lord Caraven; "I understand plain English. Has your daughter been complaining about me?"

"She has not," was the reply.

"So much the better for her," said the earl, "and so much the better for me."

Arley Ransome owned to himself that the events of that day had not been altogether pleasant.

CHAPTER XVIII

"HEAVEN HELP ME, FOR I AM BEGINNING TO HATE HIM"

"Hildred," said Lord Caraven, "Captain Fane will dine with us this evening. Try to get someone else to meet him."

She was in the library, busily engaged in writing letters to St. Roche, and her husband's sudden entrance startled her. It was a bright morning, and the sun shone on her graceful head. She wore a pretty morning costume, dainty white lace encircling the white throat and arms. A man's heart might have warmed to her with exceeding great love—Lord Caraven's did not; he never even stopped to look at her, to make any inquiries about her, or to speak a few words of kindly greeting.

"Captain Fane dines with us this evening," he repeated, and then Hildred laid down her pen and looked into his face.

"I do not like Captain Fane," she said, quickly.

"Possibly; but then, you see, that has nothing to do with the matter."

He spoke quite good-humoredly, but his wife saw a slight flush on his face.

"Captain Fane, you may be surprised to hear, was rude to me when I saw him at Lady Redsley's ball."

"Indeed! I have never heard anything against him

of that kind. If he really was rude, you must have annoyed him."

"I did nothing of the kind, Lord Caraven," she replied, quietly.

"What did he do or say?" he asked.

"I decline to tell you. You evidently disbelieve what I say; but if Captain Fane dines here, I shall not."

"That is as you wish," he replied.

"I mean it, Lord Caraven. If Captain Fane dines here, I shall not enter the dining-room."

"Then I must make an apology for your absence, and say that you have a headache," he replied.

"I will give no orders for dinner for Captain Fane," said Hildred.

"I think you will, Lady Caraven; if not, they will be given for you. Mind, there is a limit to my patience—you must not often abuse it. It is plain that you dislike Captain Fane because I like him."

"No, it is not so, I assure you, Lord Caraven. I was told not many days since that Captain Fane was strongly suspected of some unfair dealings at cards, and would be requested to leave your club."

"I do not believe it," he said, abruptly. "It is mere gossip—it is not true."

"It is true, for the Duchess of Morley told me. She said she would tell me whom to know and whom not to know; among the latter was Captain Fane."

"It is all nonsense," he said, but he began to fear there might be something in the story.

"You are at liberty to believe or to disbelieve,"

returned his wife, haughtily. "I will say no more—only that I refuse distinctly to meet Captain Fane."

The earl quitted the room really angry at last. He was naturally of an even temper. He was, perhaps, too indolent to be of any other, but he was really angry this time.

"A school-girl like that to defy me in my own house," he said—"it is quite unendurable."

He rang for the housekeeper and gave orders for a *recherche* dinner.

"She shall see," he thought, "that those airs will not do with me."

Hildred had gone to her room. She would not permit the servants to know that there was anything wrong. Her only resource was to shut herself up in her room and leave them to imagine that she had a bad headache. Shut up there, she heard all that passed. She heard Captain Fane's arrival, and dinner being served. She heard the sound of laughter—then came a silence and she knew, just as though she had been present, that the earl and his guest were playing at cards.

Captain Fane did not leave the house until after two in the morning, and then Hildred heard her husband go to his own room.

She was deeply mortified. Of how little use, of how little value she was in that house after all! She expressed decided disapprobation of a person, and he was received with all honor. She had said she would not enter the room if he were there; he came, and she was compelled to remain away. She had no influence,

no command—she was merely a cipher. She walked quickly up and down the room, her beautiful face all flushed, her eyes bright with anger, her fingers interlaced.

"I cannot bear it much longer," she said. "I am beginning to hate him—heaven help me, to hate him! What shall I do?"

That night no sleep, no rest came to her. She was thinking hour after hour what she was to do. The prospect before her frightened her. She saw no light in the dark clouds, no hope, no help—the years stretched out, so dark and dreary, and she wept the silent hours away. She felt half nervous on meeting her husband again; although there was no love, no affection between them, still it was not often that they had angry words.

It was the close of the afternoon when he came in, and he went at once in search of her.

"Hildred," he said, "I have come to apologize, to beg your pardon for my want of civility yesterday. I am afraid that I lost my temper."

She bowed with cold politeness.

"Now, Hildred," he cried, "I will not be put off with a ceremonious bow. Do you know that the fact of quarreling and making friends with you again makes me feel that we ought to be on the best of terms? Do not bow to me, say that you accept my apology."

"I accept it," she replied; "and beg your pardon, if I have displeased you."

"That is satisfactory. Now I have to tell you that

you were right, and that I was wrong. Captain Fane is a cheat and a rogue. I won a hundred pounds from him last evening. I have returned it to-day—I would not soil my fingers with his money. What the duchess told you was quite true—he was detected cheating at cards. A long farewell to Captain Fane! He was not worth quarreling about—was he, Hildred?"

"No," she replied; and something of happiness, to which she had long been a stranger, sprang up in her heart, because he spoke so kindly to her.

For a day or two after that little incident matters were more pleasant between them. Then the old indifference came back, and the young wife's misery with it.

May was drawing to a close, when Lord Caraven one evening received a letter which appeared to give him the keenest delight. He read it, and then went with it to his wife.

"Hildred, here is good news; but I am too hasty—perhaps you will not think it good news."

"If it pleases you so much I shall," she replied, gently.

"You have heard me speak of my cousin, Sir Raoul Laureston, the 'hero of a hundred fights?'"

"No," replied Hildred. "I have never even heard his name."

"That seems strange," said the earl.

"Not at all," she replied, quietly. "You forget that you have never spoken of your family to me at all. I do not know the name of a single relative that you have."

He looked incredulously at her.

"I am very careless," he said; "but I did not think that I was so bad as that. I will make amends now by telling you about Sir Raoul Laureston."

"Raoul," repeated Hildred. "Is he—no, he cannot be a Frenchman, Lord Caraven, if he is a relative of yours."

"No, but the name has puzzled many people. His mother was a French lady of noble birth, and one of her ancestors, named Raoul de Courcelles, distinguished himself greatly in the French wars; it was her fancy to name her boy after him."

Hildred repeated the word "Raoul."

"I like the name, Lord Caraven," she said, slowly.

"And I like the name," he told her. "I do not know anyone in the world whom I like better than Raoul. Yet he gives himself great airs with me. He is—you will laugh when you hear it—he is my master—at least used to be in years gone by. But what I wanted to tell you is this—he is coming back to England, and he has always made his home at my house; he has never lived anywhere but at Halby House or Ravensmere—never—and I hope never will."

She looked up at him wonderingly.

"I understand. But what has that to do with me?"

He looked somewhat confused.

"After all, you are the mistress of the house, the *chatelaine*, and I should not like to ask anyone to make their home with us who would be at all—now let me see how to express myself diplomatically—who would be displeasing to you."

"Thank you," she said, briefly.

"After all, home—whether it be happy or miserable—is always home, and I should not like to make yours really uncomfortable. If you say that Sir Raoul will be in your way at all, I will not ask him—if you think you will be as happy with him as without him, then I shall be pleased to see him in his old place."

"I thank you for your consideration," she replied, with dignity; "but, as nothing could possibly make what you call 'home' more unhappy for me, and the coming of a stranger, who may prove a friend, will be some little comfort, I say unhesitatingly, 'Yes.'"

He looked at her half sadly.

"Are you really unhappy—really not happy?" he asked.

"If living where no friendly face ever smiles on me, where no friendly voice ever reaches my ear, where no one cares for me or takes the least interest in me, be happiness, then I must be very happy," she said, bitterly.

"Is it so bad as that?" he asked, and there was a shadow of pain on his face.

"It is worse," she replied.

Only a few short weeks since her heart would have beaten fast with happiness to hear words spoken so kindly; now she turned away, and from her heart to her lips rose the unspoken prayer: "Heaven help me, for I am beginning to hate him!"

CHAPTER XIX

"THE BRAVE COLONEL RAOUL LAURESTON

The name of Raoul Laureston was known throughout the land; he had proved himself to be a hero. It was not merely in government dispatches and newspaper paragraphs that he was praised; his name was on men's lips when they gathered together and talked of Old England's glory and of her gallant sons; when they told how English soldiers fought and died, with the strength of lions, the bravery of heroes, they always mentioned the brave Colonel Raoul Laureston.

He was not wealthy—he was the younger son of the younger branch of the house of Caraven; he had no great patrimony; his whole fortune amounted to about five thousand pounds. But he was a soldier, born and bred; he could never have been anything else. He was as brave as a lion; he knew not fear. They told wonderful stories of him in the army—how he had saved lives while his own life was in peril; how he was loved and worshiped by the men under his command. It was a good thing to belong to Raoul Laureston's regiment; he never forgot any man serving in it; he had the interest of each one at heart. Many a young officer who, in other hands, would have gone to the bad—would have ended a shameful life by a shameful death—with him became a good and brave

soldier. He had the gift of winning men's hearts; his words were few but eloquent. Like all great men, he was utterly devoid of vanity and egotism; in his soul there was no room for small vices.

So, among a world of commonplace men, he had made for himself a name and fame. When the red flag of war was unfurled, and every home in the land had sent its sons to maintain the honor of Old England, Raoul Laureston's name became a household word. Mothers whose sons were at the war wept on hearing it; men told what they had read of him, and their hearts grew warm as they spoke. Then came the battle when, at the head of his regiment, he rode "into the jaws of death," sword in hand, his brave face shining with the light of courage. "Follow me!" he cried; and sword in hand, he closed with the foe. Men told how the red sunset found him still there. How many lives he had saved by his valor none could say. There were other brave men present who declared that Raoul Laureston had made the day their own.

He was knighted for his bravery, and then, as though fortune did not know how to lavish sufficient favors upon him, he succeeded to a large fortune, left to him by a comparative stranger, his godfather. But the brave soldier never quite recovered from a terrible wound he had received in battle. The slightest effort, the least exertion, brought on an attack of illness that was always dangerous. And across his brow, just over the right temple, was a deep, red scar, left there by the bayonet of a foe. He was sent to France and to Italy. It seemed as though his military career was ended.

It had been a terrible grief to him to have to give up his profession and live abroad. He said to his doctors:

"While I have life I shall hope; the health and the strength I have lost may return to me—I may hold a sword again. Heaven is kind."

But for the last four years he had been at Nice, and had grown weaker, and a great longing had come over him to see England again.

"If I must die," he said, "let me die there."

And seeing that the home-sickness was a bar to his recovery, the doctors allowed him to return.

It was strange—the journey did him good; he was stronger when he reached London than he had been for some time. Then he wrote to the only relative he had—Lord Caraven—asking if he should, as usual, make his home with him. He had not heard of the earl's marriage—Lord Caraven never wrote a letter unless he was compelled to do so—and Sir Raoul had not read the notice of it in the English newspapers. Had he known of the marriage, he would never have dreamed of going to his kinsman's home.

He heard it from one of his brother officers, who hastened to welcome him to England, and was at first incredulous. He had always loved the handsome, willful boy who looked up to him with such affection, and it had been a bitter source of trouble to him to find him inclined to go the wrong way in life. Raoul Laureston was many years older than the earl, but they had always been good friends. In his light, frank way he had scolded the handsome boy—now he

scolded the man. He had done his best to exercise a wise control over the earl. There were times when he fancied that he should succeed—there were others when he knew that he had failed.

It was with positive incredulity that he heard of the marriage. When Major Vandaleur told him the news, the brave soldier refused to believe it.

"Caraven would never have married without telling me," he said. "He has not written to me for years, but he would have written if that had been the case."

"I assure you," declared Major Vandaleur, "that I was present at the ceremony. He was married at St. George's, Hanover Square."

"I must not dispute what you saw with your own eyes," said Sir Raoul. "That granted then, whom has he married?"

"A Miss Ransome," was the brief reply.

"Ransome? I do not remember the name."

Major Vandaleur laughed.

"No, you have probably never heard it—though there are few young men in the army who could say as much. Ransome is a lawyer and a money-lender."

The soldier's face fell.

"A money-lender! You cannot be serious! Caraven marry a money-lender's daughter! I cannot believe it."

"It is true. I remember the lady's name—Hildred Ransome. I did not see her, although I was in the church during the marriage; the crush was so great I could not. The bridegroom's tall head towered above the crowd; I saw a vision of white and silver but not the bride's face or figure."

"A money-lender's daughter! Is she beautiful, Vandaleur?"

"I cannot say; I have never seen her. Caraven did say that she was an unformed school-girl. It was a queer marriage for our handsome friend."

"Had she a fortune? Did she fall in love with him, or what?"

"Of course she had a fortune—a very large one, I believe—some say two hundred thousand pounds. I know one thing—Caraven was utterly ruined; he had not a shilling to fall back upon, and after his marriage he appeared in full feather. Halby House has been the house of the season; and I am told that Ravensmere in its magnificence is equal to a palace. He must have had a large fortune with the lady."

"I hope that he married her a little from love," said Sir Raoul.

Major Vandaleur looked at him.

"Lord Caraven had been going steadily to the bad for many years past," he remarked. "I do not think that you would recognize him—his character, I mean; he has not carried out the promise of his boyhood."

"He has had great temptations," said the soldier, "and no occupation; in those few words you have the cause of many ruined lives. If what you say be the case, major, I shall hesitate about going to Halby House. I have always made my home with the boy because I loved him; but a wife in the house alters matters. What is she like, this Lady Caraven?"

"I cannot tell you; I have not met her. The only time I heard her discussed was on her wedding-day;

she was only just eighteen, and people said she looked very unhappy."

"Only eighteen! And when was he married, Vandaleur?"

"Last year, Laureston."

"Then she is only nineteen now; that is very young," said Sir Raoul, musingly. "I am afraid I should be an interloper. And I should not feel at home. Caraven is very fond of her, I should say. I do not think that I shall go to Halby House."

"You have plenty of money," returned the major, brusquely; "why not buy a place of your own?"

"I would do so—that is, I would have done so long ago, but that I am uncertain about my own life; it has hung upon a thread so long that I have never dreamed of anything for myself."

"I ought to be a judge," said the major; "and I prophesy from your appearance that you will grow better—not worse."

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a note for Sir Raoul.

"It is from Caraven," he said, as he hastily broke the seal.

As he read it, his whole face brightened, a light came into his eyes.

"I knew the boy's heart was in the right place," he remarked. "There could not be a kinder letter than that. He will not hear of my remaining here or going elsewhere. I am to go to Halby House at once, where everything is at my service, and his wife joins in begging me to go. The boy is not changed, you see. His heart is good."

And the major, having some little respect for Sir Raoul, forbore to tell him what rumor said about the handsome earl and his heart. "I shall go," said Sir Raoul—"this has quite decided me. You think I am right, do you not?" he added, seeing a strange smile on the major's face.

"Certainly. I was thinking of the earl, not of you;" and long after the two friends had parted, Major Vandaleur looked very grave.

"It is like going into a wasp's nest," he said. "Raoul is a noble, simple-hearted soldier. He will have little patience with the earl—perhaps even less with his wife."

No such thought troubled Sir Raoul; to him it seemed quite right and just that his kinsman should extend the hand of welcome, that his wife and himself should beg him to visit them, that their home should be his.

"I may be able to do him some good," said Sir Raoul. "Ulric always listened to me."

So he was full of hope as he drove to Halby House.

"What will this young wife be like?" he wondered. "A money-lender's daughter—nothing very noble or brilliant; but Ulric loved her, I suppose. She will be a city *demoiselle*. Let us hope, for Ulric's sake, that she is pretty and accomplished."

He caught himself wondering more than once what she would be like, and then he laughed at himself for his pains.

"I have so few relatives," he said, "that the fact of finding a new one is something wonderful."

His worn face flushed with emotion as the carriage stopped at Halby House.

"When a man has but a few friends, he knows how to value them," he said to himself. "I know Ulric will be pleased to see me again."

CHAPTER XX

"I DO NOT LIKE HER"

The earl was at home expecting Sir Raoul. He was shown into the library, and there in a few moments he was found by his kinsman. They met with outstretched hands and warm words of greeting, but the earl looked sorrowfully into his kinsman's face.

"You have suffered very much, Raoul," he said, quietly.

"Yes, and never thought to see you again. You are changed too, Ulric—I feel inclined to ask where is the sunny-faced boy whom I loved so dearly?"

Lord Caraven laughed a little bitter laugh.

"The truth is, Raoul, I have not turned out very well. I may have been a good boy but I have scarcely made a good man."

"A fault acknowledged is often half amended," said Sir Raoul.

"Yes," admitted the earl, carelessly; "but I feel no great desire to amend—I half wish that I did."

"I hear wondrous news, Ulric—that you are married. Is it true?"

The earl's face darkened, as it generally did when any mention was made of his wife.

"Yes," he replied, gloomily. "I am married."

"And your wife, I have been told, had a large fortune."

"That is true," he said. "Have they told you anything else?"

"No, except that she was Miss Hildred Ransome, the great lawyer's daughter."

"The great money-lender and schemer's daughter," corrected the earl.

"She will not be answerable for her father's faults. What is she like, Ulric, this young wife of yours? I never had a sister, and my mother died when I was a boy. It will be quite a novelty to me to claim kinship with a lady."

"All novelties are not agreeable ones," was the moody reply.

"This one will be, I am sure. I shall be quite proud to address, 'My cousin, Lady Caraven.'"

"You are a *preux chevalier*, Raoul—you believe in the sex," said the earl.

"And do not you, Ulric?"

"No, not in one of them. The fact is, I feel quite certain that you will not like my wife, and it annoys me."

"Like her?" echoed Sir Raoul. "How strangely you speak! Certainly I shall do more than like her, your wife and my cousin. I tell you that the thought of seeing her is a positive pleasure to me."

With hasty steps Lord Caraven walked up and down the room. He seemed as though about to speak, but then stopped abruptly. He stood at last in front of his cousin.

"Raoul," he said, "I am not good at keeping a secret. The truth is, I do not like my wife."

"Not like her, Ulric! You are jesting, surely?"

"I wish to heaven that I were! I know I am a prodigal, a spendthrift; but I think sometimes, now that I am a little older, that I might have been a better man had I been happily married."

"But, if you did not like her," said Raoul, with an air of utter astonishment, "why did you marry her?"

"That is the question. I think the answer is—because her father wished her to be a countess."

"What had his wish to do with you, Ulric?"

"Some day I will tell you all," he replied. "It is not a pleasant theme. But, with all my faults, I dislike deceit and I would not have you think that you are about to enter upon a scene of domestic felicity."

"But the lady herself," said Sir Raoul—"since you confide in me I may speak—does she know that you do not love her?"

"Yes, there has never been any pretense of affection between us."

"Then," said Sir Raoul, slowly, "it seems to me that the lady herself is the one to be pitied—between her father and you."

"You can pity her if you like—she can hold her own remarkably well," returned the earl. "I do not want to talk about it, Raoul. Every man pays the price of his folly, sooner or later—I am paying it now. I do not care ever to mention the matter again, but I thought, if you had some idea of entering an earthly Eden, you had better be disabused."

"I wish that it were an earthly Eden," said Sir Raoul, slowly.

"My wife brought me a large fortune—a fortune that saved me from ruin—and I insist always upon all respect being shown to her. She is, as she ought to be, entirely mistress of the house. I am always particular about that. Now that we have finished with the matter, there is, perhaps, one thing more that I should say. My wife will be pleased to see you; she will make you very welcome."

"And you do not like her?" interrogated Sir Raoul.

"Well," replied the earl, "you see, she is not my style—not at all my style. I like fair women—she is dark; beside, I never think that a man loves a woman whom he is compelled to marry."

"You were compelled to marry her, then?" said Sir Raoul.

"It was either that or ruin—such ruin as would have left me penniless. I did hesitate for some time whether I should purchase a revolver or marry Miss Ransome."

"My dear boy, why did you not send to me?"

"There are things that a gentleman cannot do," said the earl, proudly. "I could not borrow from my friends."

"People have different ideas of honor—some of them are very strange ones. For my part, I should think it a thousand times more honorable to borrow from an old friend than to marry a girl for her money, knowing that I disliked her."

"The alternative was forced upon me, Beside,

Raoul, all that you had in the world would not have been sufficient."

"Was it so bad as that?" he asked.

"Yes, it could not have been worse. Do not let me be a hypocrite, Raoul. That lesson would have lasted some men their lives—it has not been sufficient for me. I do not think, honestly speaking, that I am one whit a wiser man than I was. The only thing is that fortune has been with instead of against me."

"Poor boy," said Sir Raoul, pityingly; "we must hope for better things. Shall I see your wife to-night?"

"No, I think not. Lady Caraven has gone to Covent Garden—a favorite opera of hers is being played. She will not be home until late. You look very tired, Raoul—I should advise you to go to bed. We shall not remain many weeks in London. You will, of course, go to Ravensmere with us?"

"If you desire it; if you are kind enough to invite me. I shall be very pleased. I might have twenty places of my own, but none of them would seem so much like home as Ravensmere."

And Sir Raoul laughed. Fatigued as he was, he seemed in no hurry to leave his kinsman.

"I am rather disappointed," he said, at last. "I had hoped that I should see my new kinswoman to-night."

Lord Caraven looked incredulously at him.

"I can hardly believe that you are serious," he exclaimed. "Do you really desire so much to see my wife?"

"I do indeed," replied Sir Raoul, earnestly.

"I do not understand it," said the earl, with an amused smile. "You are slightly curious about her personal appearance? Well, I am not a judge, as I like fair people, and she is tall and dark. These are the only two points in her which have struck me. Yes, there is one thing more—she sings with ravishing sweetness. I have never heard a finer voice. I think, too, that she has a will and spirit of her own; but I repeat—though I did not intend to repeat it—that I do not like her."

"Tall and dark." Sir Raoul immediately pictured to himself a somewhat forbidding, masculine-looking girl, with a hard face and a hard manner. He was half-disenchanted. None but himself knew how he had longed all his life for sisters. The notion of a woman—a delicate, refined lady—who would be kind to him, was blissful to him; and though this wife of the earl's was a money-lender's daughter, she might be feminine and graceful.

He was disappointed. He fancied that Lord Caraven would never have spoken of her as he did if she had been what he had hoped to find her. Farewell to his idea of the sweet companionship of a delicate, refined woman! Farewell to his idea of passing long, pleasant hours with the earl's young wife! He remembered that as a boy Ulric had been devoted to the fair sex; he had often rallied him on it. He remembered a thousand and one scrapes into which the boy had fallen from his propensity to flirtation. He knew that his cousin had been called "the handsome earl," and the only satisfactory conclusion at which he could

arrive was that the girl-wife must be displeasing in appearance.

"Tall and dark"—certainly there was not much in that. Sir Raoul retired to his room, slightly disappointed and disenchanted. He could not sleep; bygone scenes in his own life rose before him. It was long after midnight when he heard the roll of a carriage, and then the soft rustle of a silken dress, as light footsteps passed his door.

"That is the young countess," he said to himself—"my new cousin—tall and dark."

CHAPTER XXI

"IF SHE BE NOT FAIR TO ME WHAT CARE I HOW FAIR SHE BE"

The earl entered Sir Raoul's room early in the morning.

"Raoul," he said, "I have just come to say that everything must go on as usual. Do as you like; get up when you like; go out when you like; order dinner, luncheon, breakfast, at any time you will. You must not make any difference between this visit and those you used to pay. I am not much at home myself."

Sir Raoul laid his hand on the young man's arm.

"How is that?" he asked, earnestly. "Ulric, is not home pleasant to you?"

"To tell you the truth, it is not—not very pleasant. I may be fanciful, but to me there seems always a look of reproach on my wife's face. That is not the only reason; I scorn to make false excuses. I find more attraction away from home than in it. Now you will be happy, Raoul?"

"Yes," he replied, and long after his cousin left him Sir Raoul lay thinking what he could do to make matters pleasanter between husband and wife.

He little knew with what pride, indifference, contempt, and dislike he would have to do battle. He knew, too, that as a rule, all interference between hus-

band and wife was worse than useless—that, if they quarreled themselves, they would allow no one else to interfere in the quarrel. But this was not a mere quarrel—it was far worse.

"I would give something," he thought, "to restore harmony; but of course all depends on what she is like."

What was she like? After being at the opera she would not rise until late, he felt sure. He himself went downstairs early. Sir Raoul liked the fresh morning air.

The first sound that fell upon his ears was the singing of a bird and the next the falling spray of a fountain. He looked around. He saw then what improvements had been made in Halby House. A conservatory had been built out from the breakfast-room, long and wide—a conservatory that was almost an aviary, so full was it of bright-plumaged birds; a fountain stood in the midst, masses of brilliant bloom glowed upon the walls.

"This was a welcome for the bride," thought Sir Raoul. "Perhaps, however, she has not much taste for flowers."

No one seemed to be about; the breakfast-table was prepared, but there was no one to preside. Sir Raoul looked round; he thought he would go through the conservatory, and perhaps by that time there would be some news of breakfast. He opened the glass door, and walked through a fairyland of sweet blossoms; the spray of the fountain fell with melodious music into the clear basin below,

"How beautiful!" thought the simple soldier.

He walked on until he saw a vision that suddenly struck him dumb. At the end of the conservatory was a large, vine-wreathed door; the green leaves formed a perfect screen, and against them stood a figure such as Sir Raoul had never seen before and never afterward forgot—a tall, graceful, girlish figure—a figure that was all symmetry, with a slender, graceful neck, white as snow, lovely shoulders, round, white arms, draped in an elegant morning dress.

The lady was standing with her face averted, so that he could not at first see it. He beheld a queenly head, covered with masses of black, shining hair. He stood for some minutes lost in admiration; and then with a deep sigh she turned slowly round.

If he had thought the figure beautiful, he was even more enchanted with the face. He saw dark, star-like eyes, fringed with long lashes and an imperial brow; he saw a mouth that was like a pomegranate-bud, fresh, red and indescribably lovely; he saw a splendid face oval in contour, and with the exquisite coloring that Titian gives in his pictures, dainty and brilliant. Yet over the beauty of the face sadness hung like a veil. He saw the glow of a scarlet geranium in the bodice of her dress, and one in the dusky depths of her jet-black hair.

That it was the money-lender's daughter never for a moment entered his mind—that he saw before him his cousin's wife never occurred to him. This beautiful girl was, of course, a visitor, like himself—one of Lady Caraven's friends, he thought to himself, half

sadly. It was not to be wondered at, with this glorious young beauty near to distract him, that the earl did not care for his wife.

He went forward to speak to her, and then for the first time she was conscious of his presence. She raised her dark eyes and looked at him. There are moments in life not to be forgotten—this was one. The dark eyes appeared to look right into his heart, and he seemed to recognize the soul that shone through them. She walked up to him, still looking at him, as though drawn by magic to him, his eyes half smiling into the depths of hers. He bowed at her approach.

She looked for one half minute into the worn, scarred, noble face.

"I cannot be mistaken," she said, holding out both her hands in welcome. "You must be Sir Raoul Laureston."

"I am," he replied, taking the delicate hands in his with chivalrous *empressement*. "And you?"

"And I?" she said, with a charming smile and a look of pretty astonishment. "I am Lady Caraven."

In the shock of his surprise he dropped her hands. This Lady Caraven, the unformed school-girl, the unloved wife, "tall and dark," one whom he would not like—this splendid woman! What had the earl meant by it? Sir Raoul was so startled that the shock kept him silent; and she, noticing this, thought that he was disappointed in her.

"Lady Caraven," he said, at last—"my kinswoman! Do you know that I can hardly believe it?"

"Why not?" she asked simply.

"Because I expected to see someone quite different."

"And you are disappointed?" she said, slowly, half sadly.

His face lighted up eagerly.

"Nay, how can you say so? I am charmed, delighted. I cannot believe in my own good fortune in having so fair a cousin."

"Are you quite sure?" she asked. "For I fear that I have disappointed most people."

"I am indeed, sure," he replied, and looking into his face she could not doubt it.

"You are Sir Raoul?" she continued. "I have been longing to see you ever since I heard that you were coming. Will you let me bid you a thousand welcomes home?"

He repossessed himself of her hands and clasped them warmly.

"You are a brave soldier," she said—"a hero. Again let me bid you welcome home!"

"That is the sweetest welcome I have ever had," declared Sir Raoul. "I shall not forget it." The fair face was smiling at him, the lovely eyes were full of welcome, the ruby lips smiling kindly. It seemed to him that her whole heart was in the greeting she gave him. And Lord Caraven had said that he did not like this most charming and lovely girl!

"You are looking very ill, Sir Raoul," she said; 'you will want nursing and taking care of. You must be well tended, and then you will grow strong.'

He touched his breast lightly with his hand—that noble breast, the home of a noble soul.

"I shall never be very strong, I fear. Lady Caraven, I would give all my fortune for health—but heaven knows best."

The dark eyes were full of womanly sympathy and compassion; they rested kindly on him.

"You are going to remain here," she said; "to make your home with us?"

"I hope so," he responded, heartily. "I have no other home. This would indeed be one."

She had drawn nearer to him—so near that the delicate lace on her dress touched him.

"I am so glad," she said, in her soft, caressing tones; "and will you really let me take care of you just as though you were my own brother come home from the wars?"

"Have you a brother?" he asked.

"No," she replied; "I am an only child."

"And I have no sister. I have always wished for one. When I was a strong man who did not know what aches and pains meant, I used to wish that I had a woman's gentle mind and heart to guide me; when health and strength left me, when I became almost helpless, I longed for the gentle hands of a woman near me; but my longing was never gratified."

She looked at him with a smile.

"You should have looked for a wife, Sir Raoul."

She repented of her words when she saw the terrible change that came over his face.

"A wife? No; I shall never have a wife. I wanted a sister."

"You must let me take a sister's place," she said

gently. "You do not know what your coming means to me. It will give me what I need so sorely—an occupation. You will let me nurse you when you are ill, wait upon you, read to you—tend you in all ways?"

"I am afraid that you will spoil me, Lady Caraven."

"No; but I will try to make you well and strong again. Do you really promise me that I may do this?"

His pale face flushed.

"Do you know," he said, "that you really embarrass me? I feel as though some fair young princess were offering to take charge of me. How can I thank you? It seems to me that the desire of my heart is gratified. I have a kinswoman to love at last."

She laid her hand on his arm, and walked with him into the breakfast-room.

"You ought not to have risen so early," she said; "and now you must atone for that by taking some of my tea. I pride myself on being a good tea-maker."

Looking at her he thought that, if she prided herself on her exquisite grace and her girlish loveliness, it would be only natural. He was perfectly charmed with her; she was modest and unaffected; there was a certain grace in her frank, kindly manner which made it impossible not to feel at home with her.

He was entirely so; and he smiled to himself. They were seated at the table as though they had known each other for years.

"But surely," he said, "we are remiss. We are not waiting for Ulric."

Her expression changed slightly, as it always did at the mention of her husband's name.

"Lord Caraven never takes breakfast here," she said, slowly. "Our hours are not the same."

"Then he is a bad judge," remarked Sir Raoul. "I would far rather take breakfast here than anywhere else in the world."

To this Lady Caraven made no reply.

Before that day was half ended Sir Raoul was lost in wonder. How was it that the earl did not love this beautiful girl? He himself was charmed with her; he thought her delightful.

"Talk of an unformed school-girl!" he cried, indignantly. "If Ulric calls her a school-girl, I should like to see whom he calls a beautiful woman! She is enchanting! She is fire and snow; she is humble, yet proud—haughty yet gracious. She has character enough for a dozen school-girls, and they would all be above the average. I did not think a man could be so blind."

He had reason to know that she was as tender of heart as she was fair of face, for that same morning the old pain in his chest, the enemy that had laid him low, returned with redoubled violence. He was ghastly white and trembled with pain. Then he learned what the gentle hands of a woman were like. She showed no fear, no agitation. She was calm, tender, self-possessed. In one moment she had gathered sort, downy pillows together on a couch so as to support him.

"You will breathe more easily, Sir Raoul, if you lie there," she said.

It was a pitiful sight—the strong, handsome man,

the gallant soldier, the brave officer, the hero of a hundred fights, lying there gasping for breath, great drops of anguish standing on his brow—a sight to make a man shudder and a woman weep.

There was no haste in her manner—no agitation such as renders the kindest of women useless when they are most needed. She helped to place him on the couch, she laid the poor, helpless head on soft pillows, she fetched some fragrant essence, and, kneeling by his side, bathed his face. She did not weary him by speaking or by useless expressions of sympathy. She watched the white, parted lips, and gave him wine. When the terrible paroxysm had passed he opened his eyes, all dimmed and dull with pain.

"See what war can do," he said, slowly. "You are very good to me. It is coming again."

Again she helped him, never once losing her self-control.

"Is it gone?" she asked, as the tension of pain passed from his face and his hands were unclenched.

"Yes, thank you. I did wisely to wish for a woman's gentle hands. I am grateful to you."

Then he told her how fiery the ordeal had been through which he had passed.

"Can you imagine," he said, "what it is to me, a once strong man, a soldier, with all a soldier's longing for action—can you imagine what I feel at having to spend the greater part of my time on a couch? The very manhood within me recoils from it. I am always dreaming of what I could do if I were strong and well. I dream sometimes that I am on my favor-

ite charger, sword in hand. I see the foe flying before me, and I am in hot pursuit. I wake to find it a dream, and to feel the red-hot rings of pain that seem to bind me. I ask myself why is it? Then, soldier and man as I am, bow my head and say, 'Heaven knows best.'"

She was looking at him with dark, tender eyes.

"Have all lives such sorrow and care, Sir Raoul?" she asked. "Is no one free?"

"I think not—the young and the beautiful, the great and the wealthy, the highest in rank, all seem to have their sorrows. I often think the greatest are those that we see the least of."

"Why is it?" she asked, thoughtfully.

"How many times have I asked the same question of myself! I should say that souls require suffering to purify them as gold does the fire."

"I am quite sure," she said, raising her face to his, "that I should be better always for being happier."

"It is natural enough to think so—I am not sure that it is true. There are noble qualities latent in most people; suffering draws them out. But you, young and—pardon me, my kinswoman—beautiful, should not want to be happier than you are."

She made him no answer, but the dark eyes drooped sadly. If he knew, if he only knew, the secret history of her life!

That day passed so quickly and so pleasantly to Sir Raoul that he could not realize his new existence.

When the pain had left him, and he was able to sit up, she brought him books and photographs; she

talked to him and amused him; she made the time pass so quickly that he marveled at her quick intelligence, her womanly wit. There was a touch even of genius in her noble, keen appreciation of art, in her passionate love of music. Then a dainty little luncheon was brought to him, after which she insisted on his driving out with her.

Sir Raoul laughed.

"I shall begin to think that I am a carpet knight," he said.

"The hard work went before it," rejoined Hildred. "You will enjoy a drive, Sir Raoul—the sun is warm and the air is mild."

He sat by the side of the beautiful, tender-hearted, graceful girl, and they found a hundred subjects of conversation. The fragrant air, the warm sunbeams, the beautiful face, the sweet, caressing voice, all greatly affected Sir Raoul. Then, when they returned, she bade him adieu until dinner-time. He looked at her half anxiously.

"How do you employ your time when you have no visitors?" he said. "You have busied yourself with me the whole day."

"I do the best I can," she replied. "Sometimes I have engagements—callers. I try to study, but I am afraid I spend a great deal of time in thinking. This morning when you came to me in the conservatory, I had been standing there more than an hour, thinking idle thoughts."

"But," said Sir Raoul, "does not Caraven ever spend a morning with you at home?"

He noticed the same change come over her face as came over it before when she heard her husband's name.

"No," she replied, briefly, turning away; "we meet at dinner-time, not before."

He thought long and anxiously after she had gone. How strange it was that Caraven, always delighting in beautiful women, could not care for her! What a sad thing! Both so young, with every fair gift of life before them, every gift the world could bestow lavished on them, yet miserable because they did not love each other—husband and wife, sworn to love and honor each other, yet further apart than strangers—even disliking each other! It seemed to him pitiful.

"I wonder," he thought, "if I could do anything? If I could only restore peace and harmony to them, I should not have lived in vain."

Could he? It was early yet to judge. He must see them together, then he could tell better. He must study them both and see what it was possible to do.

The first dinner-bell had rung when the earl returned, and Sir Raoul did not see him until dinner-time. Lady Caraven was the first to enter the drawing-room, where Sir Raoul awaited her. She looked very lovely in her evening dress. It was of white—white that shone and gleamed—with picturesque patches of scarlet. She wore scarlet and white flowers, with a suite of opals. He had thought her beautiful before, but now, with her white neck and shoulders and rounded arms all shown, she looked, he thought, magnificent.

Her face brightened when she saw him. How

strange it seemed that a kindly smile should greet her in those cold rooms!

"It seems so novel and so strange, Sir Raoul," she said, "to find a kind face here."

"It ought not to seem so," responded Sir Raoul, warmly.

Then the earl came in. He passed his wife with a silent bow, never once looking at her, and she drew aside the skirts of her robe to let him go by. Sir Raoul could not help noticing that she seemed to dread lest they should even touch him. There was not much hope of love or reconciliation there. Lord Caraven went over to him at once, shook hands with him warmly, and asked him how he had spent the day.

"Very happily, thanks to Lady Caraven," he replied—"she has been all kindness to me."

The earl looked both pleased and impatient.

"You certainly seem better," he remarked. "We shall have you well yet, Raoul."

"Please heaven," said the soldier, reverently. "And when I am well I shall rejoin my regiment."

Sir Raoul saw that, instead of joining in the conversation, Lady Caraven walked away to the other end of the drawing-room, never paying the least attention to her husband—her behavior was cold, indifferent, neglectful, as his had been to her.

"I will tell you one thing, Ulric," he said; "if I do recover I shall owe something to your wife—she is the kindest nurse I have ever met with."

"Is she?" asked the earl languidly.

"If ever you fall ill yourself you will believe it, Ulric."

"I hope I never shall," returned the earl; "if I do, I shall not expect the Countess of Caraven to nurse me."

"Ulric," said Sir Raoul, in a low voice, "what induced you to tell me that your wife was tall and dark—nothing more?"

"So she is," he replied.

"Soldiers are pretty good judges—they see the women of many lands—believe me when I say that I have never met or seen a more beautiful woman than your wife."

"If she be not fair to me, what care I how fair she be?" quoted the earl. "I am glad you think so. I do not admire her style of beauty. If anyone else does, so much the better—I do not object. There is the bell. Isn't it dreadful that the sound of the dinner-bell has a greater charm for me than the discussion of a lady's beauty?"

Lady Caraven hastened forward. Her husband said something to her; she answered him with a cold, haughty look. Sir Raoul spoke; it was quite another face that she turned to him—brilliant, tender, beautiful. She begged him to take her arm. He looked at her laughingly.

"It would be cruel to take so fair an arm," he said, "with a strong one like Ulric's near."

"Mine is strong with good will," she said, smiling.

And Sir Raoul could not refuse. He leaned as lightly as possible on the lovely round arm, but his heart was warmed by her kindness.

Then he set to work resolutely to watch her, to see

if in any respect she was deficient. He could not discover anything. She took her place with consummate grace. She was well versed in all the etiquette of the table; she was a charming hostess. He saw, too, that, with all her wealth and all her beauty, she was an excellent mistress of the household; her servants were well trained and obedient.

"I do not see myself," thought Sir Raoul, "what more Ulric can desire."

He could detect no fault in her; but he did stop to wonder what their dinners must be like when they were quite alone.

The earl might have guessed the nature of his thoughts, for he said, suddenly:

"We had some friends coming to-night, but I postponed their visit, thinking that you would be tired, Raoul. We never dine alone."

The young countess made no remark. Sir Raoul saw that she had plenty of self-control; no matter how sarcastic or bitter her husband was, she was never provoked to reply.

"She has that virtue," he said to himself, "self-control—and it is a sure foundation for many others."

CHAPTER XXII

"THE WHOLE WORLD HAS GONE MAD TOGETHER"

Sir Raoul Laureston had been for three weeks at Halby House; during that time he had grown to love the young countess as though she had been a sister of his own. In proportion as his love for her increased, his affection for the earl decreased. In one he saw self-control, in the other unbridled self-indulgence. He thought over and over again that so fair a girl deserved a better fate. He had also become less sanguine as to the reconciliation of husband and wife, less hopeful about it, and he wondered less at their estrangement. The handsome boy whom he had loved so dearly was indeed changed. He seemed to have completely lost sight of the higher ends of life. Duty was a dead letter to him. Self-indulgence, pleasure, gaming, betting, and horse-racing filled up his time to the total and inexcusable neglect of the beautiful young wife who bore his name. Indeed, after Sir Raoul arrived he neglected her more than ever. He had been accustomed to escort her to all public places, but he now went his own road, saying to himself that she was "all right"—Raoul was there, Raoul would attend to her.

They agreed very well together; but then Raoul was always different from other men—a *preux chevalier*.

For whole days together the earl did not see his wife, and oftener now than ever he dined from home. There were times when Hildred's youth and pride rose in hot rebellion against her fate, when she could not endure to remember that the gallant soldier and hero was a witness of all the slights and humiliations to which she had to submit, when she felt that she must run away from it all, for it was utterly unbearable.

One evening the earl was more than usually disagreeable. Some friends were dining with them, and during dinner Lord Caraven began to speak of one of his acquaintances who had gone abroad for his honeymoon.

"Another added to the long list of victims," he said—"another name written on the scroll of folly. He was a man who had everything he desired, yet he got married—I want a word for such folly."

"Ulric," said Sir Raoul, sharply—"pardon me—that is not the way a married man should speak."

"Pardon me," said the earl, laughingly—"it is only a married man who can speak so. You outsiders know nothing of the matter. 'Distance lends enchantment,' you know."

Sir Raoul saw a crimson flush mount to Hildred's white brow. Suddenly the young countess spoke. Her voice sounded pitilessly sweet, and was as clear as a bell.

"I quite agree with Lord Caraven," she said. "If there be one folly greater than all others, it is that which we call by the name of marriage."

There was a dead silence for a minute; even Lord

Caraven felt that he had gone too far—that he had spoken in an undignified, ungentlemanly fashion; then came Sir Raoul to the rescue.

"It is an old institution," he said; "we will not abuse it. Talking of abuse, has anyone read the *Saturday's* stinging review of Captain Hartlake's great military work?"

This changed the conversation; but that night, when the young countess was about to retire, she went across the room to Sir Raoul, and her soft fingers closed over his.

"I want to say good-night, and to thank you," she said. "I want to say also that you have been very kind, and that I feel sure you believe in what is good; so pray for me—pray for me—for I am frightened at myself."

He repeated the words after her, wondering at them:

"Frightened at herself, poor child!"

There had been a terrible wrong done here. **Who** had done it? Was it the money-lending father who had sold his child for a coronet? Was it the spendthrift lord who had been willing to build up his credit again with the money-lender's money? On which of them lay the guilt of that loveless, luckless marriage? Then a new thought struck Sir Raoul. How had Hil-dred been induced to give her consent? She, so refined, so true, and so tender, so proud and so earnest, how had she been induced to consent? She must have believed in Ulric's love at some time or other, he told himself; otherwise she would never have married.

Pray for her, poor child! What deadly temptation lay in her path! He could guess. He could read of dislike of her husband in her averted, drooping eyes.

"I will help her," he thought. "In days gone by I have used my influence over my men to good purpose. I will use it now with her."

He set himself the task; but he had not much hope. The days of his sanguine faith had passed. Indifference and dislike between husband and wife were deadly foes to contend with.

Among the friends who came to see Sir Raoul was Lumley Atherstone, the famous artist—a genius who lived for art, who never saw the color of a flower, the shape of a leaf, the rosy clouds of sunset, the pearly tints of dawn, the beauty of a woman's face, or the grace of a human figure, without a thrill of joy, and a thanksgiving for the gift of discernment—an artist to whom everything was subservient to art, who estimated people only according to their powers of ideality, who was steeped in dreams of beauty—an artist who was also in some measure a man of fashion, whose least word in matters of taste was as law. No matter how the world praised a woman, if his decision was unfavorable no one ventured to call her a beauty; if he praised her, her reputation was made.

He was fastidious, too, in his art; no matter how wealthy the person who wished for a portrait—no matter whether she were princess or duchess—unless she would make a picture that would do credit to him he would sternly refuse to paint it. He would have nothing to do with commonplace people or common-

place faces. What would have been impertinence in another was fastidiousness in him; and he was respected all the more for his plain speaking.

When the wife of a wealthy merchant went to him and exhibited a face that indicated good temper and luxurious living she was politely assured by the artist that he had more engagements for the next three years than he could possibly fulfill. If a countess with shrewd, crabbed features requested a sitting, he made the same excuse. It was useless—Lumley Atherstone worshiped beauty. Moreover, he loved beauty of mind as well as beauty of face. A noble soul had great attractions for him; that was why he liked Sir Raoul—the picturesque side of the soldier's character had struck him, and they were the greatest of friends.

He was sitting one morning talking to Sir Raoul when Lady Caraven entered. He had not seen her before, and he at once admired her. Hildred had heard strange stories of the artist—of his fancies, his caprices, his genius—and she was delighted to meet him. She looked very lovely and *spirituelle*. She wore a dress of pale pink muslin trimmed with white lace—the pale, pretty pink set off the exquisite coloring of her face to the greatest advantage. The slender, supple figure, rounded as Hebe's, with its perfect grace of movement, the lovely southern face, the proud, noble head with its crown of dark hair, filled him with wonder and delight. He did not say much to her because he was so deeply engaged in admiring her. When Hildred had spoken to Sir Raoul, and talked for a few minutes with the artist, she went

away. With dreamy eyes Lumley Atherstone looked after her.

"She is very beautiful, Sir Raoul," he said. "I have not seen such a face or figure since I left Italy."

"Lady Caraven is certainly a lovely woman," was the quiet reply.

The artist sat quite still, wrapped in a dream. Suddenly he turned to the soldier.

"Do you think," he said, "if I asked it, as a great favor, that Lady Caraven would let me paint her portrait?"

"I cannot tell," answered Sir Raoul.

"I have just seen her—seen her in a low Venetian dress, with one white shoulder bare and a mantle of purple-and-gold round the other, a crown of red roses on her hair, and rubies round her throat."

"Seen her? Where?" asked the simple soldier, greatly perplexed.

"Here, Sir Raoul," replied the artist, touching his temple—"here, where I see pictures so tantalizing and so beautiful that I cannot reproduce them. If she will but consent I can make her and myself immortal. When may I ask her?"

"I do not understand much about the etiquette of such matters, but I should have thought it would be etiquette to speak first to Lord Caraven."

"To be sure—you are quite right; he might not like his wife's lovely face to be shown to the world. But in that case I should blame him; a man cannot but be better after having seen such a face as that."

"I do not think he will refuse, but I should most certainly speak to him first."

The fact was that Sir Raoul felt proud of the artist's great admiration, and he wished the earl to hear how the most eminent painter of the day estimated the beauty that he ignored. Such praise would not have the same value coming from anyone else; if he himself, for instance, uttered it, the earl would laugh—coming from Lumley Atherstone, he would not dare to do so.

He told the artist that he believed Lord Caraven was even then in the house, and that if he pleased he would send for him.

The earl came in, wondering what could have induced Lumley Atherstone to ask for him. The artist soon explained. Lord Caraven looked at him in wonder.

"You wish to paint Lady Caraven's portrait?" he said, blankly. "But I thought you were rather particular, you know."

"I hope I am, my lord," was the cold reply. "No artist could have a fairer subject for his pencil than Lady Caraven."

"Well," said the earl, in a tone of resignation, "I shall begin to think that I am blind. All I can say is that if Lady Caraven be willing, I shall have no objection."

"Thank you," responded the artist. "I shall hope to find time to call on the countess to-morrow."

"I am very pleased you have given your consent, Ulric," said Sir Raoul. "I was wishing only yesterday that Lady Caraven had had her portrait painted. Mr. Atherstone's picture will be one of the finest in Ravensmere."

"If it reaches there," thought the earl. "My opinion is that the whole world has gone mad together."

He was rather struck after all; it startled him to find the best judge of beauty in England speak in such rapturous terms about the countess. It was a mistake, of course, but the strange thing was to find an artist of such note mistaken—it did not often happen. He left Sir Raoul to tell the news to his wife—he would not have complimented her so highly.

CHAPTER XXIII

"I SEE A SHADOW ON THIS FACE"

A smiling June morning. Lord Caraven had, for a wonder, breakfasted with the countess and Sir Raoul. They had been talking about their plans for the summer, when the earl looked up with good-tempered laugh.

"Do you know," he said, "that I am literally tired of hearing the constant repetition of titles? Raoul, you claim relationship with Lady Caraven—why not call her 'Hildred?' Hildred, why not give over your formal and ceremonious 'Sir,' and simply say 'Raoul?'"

"I shall be only too happy," said Sir Raoul, "if my dear and beautiful kinswoman will permit it."

Before the young countess had time to answer, Lord Caraven laughed again.

"What old world notions you have, Raoul! Fancy talking about 'a dear and beautiful kinswoman!'"

"And why not, Ulric? It seems to me that the people in your set sneer at everything simple and noble. I repeat the expression—my dear and beautiful kinswoman, have I your permission to lay aside your title and call you 'Hildred?'"

"Yes," she replied, "if you wish it, Sir Raoul."

"It must be on equal terms, then."

"If you wish it, Raoul," she said.

Her face flushed, her dark eyes drooped, and her fingers played nervously with the diamond cross on her breast.

"That is better," said the earl. "I always felt compelled to be formal myself when I heard you. Hildred, have you written those notes of invitation?"

"Yes," she replied, giving him a number of envelopes. "What shall you do, Lord Caraven, if they all say 'Yes?'"

"It will be so much the better," he replied. "But that is not probable; some always refuse. If they do accept, Ravensmere is large enough."

"I have some letters of my own to send to post with these," she said; and Sir Raoul saw, as she placed her letters in her husband's hands, how carefully she avoided touching him—so carefully, indeed, that two of the letters fell to the ground.

"My hand is not made of hot coals, Hildred!" he cried, impatiently; "you need not be afraid of touching it."

She made no reply, but, drawing back with a haughty gesture, quitted the room.

"That girl is as proud as Juno," said the earl, for want of a better comparison.

"She has every right to be proud, Ulric," remarked Sir Raoul. "She is without her equal for goodness and beauty."

"She seems to think I shall kill her if I touch her," said the earl bitterly. "She would rather lose the costliest jewel we have than touch my hand to lay it in it safely."

Sir Raoul made no reply.

"See," said the earl, recovering his good humor when he found that he was not contradicted, "all these are invitations for Ravensmere."

Sir Raoul looked up in wonder.

"You are not like me, Ulric," he returned, quietly. "I should have preferred Ravensmere and peace to the gayety you will have with all these people."

"Would you?" laughed the earl. "I tried Ravensmere and domestic felicity once, but shall never do so again—never again; it was too much for me."

"Ulric," said Sir Raoul, hastily, "I think you are much to blame."

"We will not discuss the matter," returned the earl; "that is one of the things in which I allow no interference and take no advice."

"I have none to offer," said Sir Raoul, coldly; and they said no more upon the subject.

Meanwhile the artist had made great progress with his picture. It was a work of love with him. He came to Halby House at times, and sometimes, when Sir Raoul felt well enough to escort the countess, they went to the studio. How it seemed to grow under his brush, that fair face—fair, pure, original, so exquisite in color, so dainty in bloom! When the painting was finished there was but one opinion—the portrait was simply a master-piece of art, with its delicate beauty and rich coloring.

But everyone made the same remark—the face was so sad, the dark, shadowed eyes did not look as though they had ever smiled, they were full of strange, sad

dreams; the beautiful lips were sad, and looked as though they had never laughed in girlish fashion.

Sir Raoul pointed this out to the artist.

"I see it myself," he said, "and like it. It was the expression that I noticed on the face. In speaking it was bright and animated; in repose it was, for a young face, the saddest I had ever seen. I cannot understand it. Look, Sir Raoul, at the lovely curve of the lips; yet you would think that it was the mouth of a grieving child. Look at the sad eyes. Do you know what I should like, Sir Raoul? I should like a companion picture to this, a picture painted in a few years' time, when the sun of happiness has arisen for this dear lady—it has not risen yet. I should like those two pictures to be side by side. I would call one 'Spring,' the other 'Summer.' And, Sir Raoul, do you know that I see a shadow on this face that I do not at all like—a shadow that I have seen on the face of those who die young? I have painted the portraits of some of the fairest girls and most beautiful women in Europe—I have never seen eyes so dark as these, with that peculiar expression in them, without feeling sure either of death in youth or that a story belonged to them."

Sir Raoul looked up in alarm.

"Do you think Lady Caraven delicate?" he asked.

"No, not exactly, though her face has brilliant, almost hectic coloring; but it is so sad. Youth should be bright, smiling, gay. When this shadow lies on a face, it is either because the sword of the angel of death is raised, or because there is a story in the face."

The artist mused for a little while, and then he said to Sir Raoul:

"I have seen beautiful faces that I felt sure could never be happy ones. I have one in my mind as I speak, as lovely as a woman's face can be—but there is a tragedy in it. She to whom it belongs is a young girl now: but I prophesy that her life will end strangely. She has striking eyes and beautiful lips, but I can never picture them smiling happily. So," he continued, rousing himself from his musings, "there is something in this face of Lady Caraven's that interests me greatly—a strange story, yet untold."

That conversation made Sir Raoul unhappy. It might be all the artist's fancy or nonsense, or it might be a serious warning. He could not rest until he had repeated it to the earl; it might be a warning to him, and make him more thoughtful about her. He did repeat it, and Lord Caraven looked up with an incredulous smile.

"The shadow of early death in her eyes?" he said. "Raoul, you are growing sentimental—I do not understand it."

In his simple, soldierly fashion, Sir Raoul repeated what the artist had said. The earl laughed.

"It is wonderful," he said, "how foolish men of genius are. To me Lady Caraven looks as strong and as well as anyone I know."

"But not happy, Ulric—not happy," repeated his kinsman; "and a young face should never be sad."

"I do not know that she has any particular cause for sadness," was the careless reply—"she has all that her heart desires."

"Except your love," said Sir Raoul, speaking more boldly than was his wont.

"And that," laughed the earl, "she does not want. You must allow something for hereditary tendencies, Raoul. To Arley Ransome, I should imagine, the word 'love' is unknown, except perhaps in a brief for breach of promise."

"You pain me, Ulric," said Sir Raoul, gravely—"no man should speak so of his wife."

"I am saying nothing against her," was the impatient reply; "I merely remark that I should not expect from the daughter of a man like Arley Ransome what I should expect, we will say, from the child of an artist or a poet."

Sir Raoul would not continue the conversation; but long afterward, when the portrait, which was a gem of art, came home, he asked Lord Caraven to look at it.

"See for yourself," he said, "the perfect contour of head and face, the beauty of eyes and lips; then see how utterly sad they are. One longs to see the lips smile and the eyes grow bright. I am not a man of many words, Ulric, but I should not like a wife of mine to have a face like that."

The earl laughed lightly, but he did not quite like Sir Raoul's remarks. The portrait was hung up in the drawing-room. It did not remain there long; the earl did not like to hear the comments upon it. One morning he said to Sir Raoul:

"This portrait of Hildred's is considered a very fine picture; I think I should like it to hang in the picture-gallery at the castle."

"Side by side with all the dead and gone Ladies Caraven?" replied Sir Raoul. "I do not blame you. To me there appears to be a quiet reproach in the face which it is not pleasant to see."

"There is no cause for reproach," said the earl. "You seem to think that I deceived Hildred, Raoul. From first to last there has been no mention of love between us. It was a case of money *versus* title. We both have what we wanted; therefore no more need be said."

Sir Raoul, being a wise man, said no more just then.

CHAPTER XXIV

"THE LOVELIEST LADY IN THE LAND

Never did the fine old mansion of Ravensmere look fairer than in the leafy month of June. It made a picture that gladdened one's heart—the quaint gray towers covered with clinging ivy, the oriel windows with ivy growing so thickly round them, the square turrets, the quaint, picturesque building that seemed to defy and yet to accord with all the rules of art. It rose, noble and lofty, a perfect picture of harmonious coloring. The castle was situated in the loveliest part of Devonshire. The foliage that surrounded it was magnificent. The Ravenemere woods stretched out far and wide; antlered deer reclined in the shade of them. They were woods always full of music, where bluebells grew with the red fox-glove and wild hyacinths, where starry primroses grew at the roots of the trees, and cowslips hid their sweet yellow heads—a home for the ferns—one of the loveliest of all the lovely nooks in England. On the other side of the castle lay rich, fertile lands, pleasure-gardens, a fine old orchard, a long line of glass houses, undulating corn fields where the wheat was fast ripening, clover fields where the cattle browsed in the sunshine, green lanes and meadows that led to the sea. During this June Ravensmere was looking its fairest; the trees were all

in full leaf, the hedges were pink and white—for the hawthorn was at its best—the rich scent of the clover came over the land. The interior of the castle was just as attractive. Covers and wrappers had been removed, and everything restored to its proper order, for the earl and countess were expected home with a large party of guests.

This home-coming had not been a source of great pleasure to Lady Caraven. All places were alike to her; the shadow of her unhappiness darkened them all. In London, notwithstanding the crowds, the balls, the dances, the operas, the *fetes*, the admiration she had met with, she had been miserable. A noble and loving heart like hers could not be satisfied with such frivolities; she wanted the realities of life—a husband to love her—a husband to love. She had taken her part in the gay pageant, she had gone with the crowd, she had shone fairest at balls and parties, but all the time, all the dreary time, she moaned to herself that her heart was empty, her life was vain. She was frightened, too, at finding that her dislike to her husband was increasing day by day; while she had been indifferent it had been easier to bear it—it was even easier with the mocking shadow of a never-to-be-gained love. Now that she disliked him, it was terribly hard. And she did dislike him. She shrank from the least touch of his hand. If, in passing near her, he touched even the hem of her dress, she drew it aside. She shrank from the sound of his voice. She never voluntarily entered a room if he was in it; she avoided meeting him when she could. She disliked him, and she trembled with fear at the thought.

Going back to Ravensmere gave her no particular pleasure. She knew that the earl would take a whole troop of friends with him, besides which, she was rapidly losing all hope. In Paris she had hoped that their going to Ravensmere might bring them nearer together; at Ravensmere she had hoped that in London they might, perhaps, do better. Now no such delusion came to her. She knew that there was no hope—that she might as well be at any other place as home at Ravensmere.

They had a pleasant journey from London—pleasant as far as sunshine was concerned—but Sir Raoul, who traveled with the earl and his wife, was pained at seeing the coolness between them. There was dislike on the part of the countess—avoidance on the part of the earl. He himself was the only one who talked or seemed at his ease. During the journey he tried once or twice to bring them to converse, but on Lady Hildred's face there was the cold, proud expression that he was beginning to know so well, and on the earl's face he read the very intensity of impatience. It was of no use—so he allowed matters to take their course; the consequence was that husband and wife barely exchanged one word on the journey.

It was a lovely evening when they reached the castle. The sun was shining full on the towers and turrets. Sir Raoul cried out in delight when he saw the place.

"This is just how I have seen it a hundred times in my dreams," he said. "There's no other spot in England one half so fair."

"Upon my word," said the earl, turning to him suddenly, "I wish that you had it instead of me; you would make a thousand times better master."

And Sir Raoul could not help seeing that the young countess turned to him with the same wish most plainly written on her face.

"You will be a better master yet than you have ever been," said Sir Raoul, touched at the unexpected humility of the words.

"No; I shall never improve," replied the earl, with a short laugh. "We shall soon see the quiet of Ravensmere disturbed. Do you know that only three out of twenty declined my invitation? We shall have the prettiest woman in England here."

"Who may that be?" asked Sir Raoul.

"Do you not know Lady Belle Winstone—the lovely, golden-haired young widow?"

Sir Raoul looked at the noble, beautiful face opposite to him; it could not have been prouder or colder.

"Lady Belle Winstone?" he repeated. "I have never even heard the name before. I incline to the belief" he continued, with a bow to the countess, "that we have the loveliest lady in the land at Ravensmere now."

"You are a courtier, Raoul," laughed the earl. "Everyone to his taste. Do not commit yourself to any decided opinion until you have seen Lady Belle."

"My opinion has long been formed," replied Sir Raoul, pleasantly.

Whenever he advanced the cause of the neglected, unloved wife, he did it with so much good humor that the earl could not possibly take offense.

"Lady Belle," continued his lordship, "has had more admirers than any woman in England."

"Then I should say," replied Sir Raoul, "that she was a great coquette."

Lord Caraven laughed.

"She is indeed; but then her coquetry is so delightful that a man does not mind being made a victim just for once."

"Tastes differ," said Raoul, calmly. "A coquette would never please me."

Then the carriage stopped at the great entrance, and they were at home.

Remembering that after all he owed this house to the wife he did not love, Lord Caraven deigned to say a few kind words to her; he said that he had never seen so many roses at Ravensmere, and never such beautiful blooms. She did not even turn to look at the flowers he indicated, but passed on, the words he had spoken about Lady Belle rankling in her heart.

What mattered the bloom of the roses to her? He did not love her—she did not even like him; but she could not forget that he was her husband, and it was intolerable that any other woman should have all his admiration. With a gesture of haughty pride she swept into the house. Sir Raoul understood the action well.

It was not a very bright home-coming. Lady Caraven went to her room, and sent an excuse for not appearing at the dinner-table—she was tired from the journey; but Sir Raoul, who had grown to understand every thought, every look of hers, knew quite well that

she had found the earl's ardent praise of Lady Belle unendurable.

It was true. Hildred was asking herself how she could bear it. She did not love her husband, yet in some vague way she was jealous of him. She did not like him, but she was not prepared to see him offering even the light flattery of the hour to another woman.

Sir Raoul was more troubled that night than he had ever been before. He sat down to review the situation. If he was to do anything for this unhappy husband and wife, it must be done at once! It was a strange position, and to him there came no gleam of light—no inkling as to how he should avoid his difficulties—no knowledge of what would be best to be done.

He saw one thing very plainly. The present state of things could not last long. It was impossible to think calmly of such a life as Hildred's—always unhappy, always lonely. He remembered how with the saddest voice he had ever heard she said to him one day:

"I never feel so entirely alone as when I am in a crowded Mayfair ball-room."

He understood why—this brave, noble soldier, to whom had been given the delicate instinct that reads a woman's heart. She missed the love that should have been hers. As time went on she would miss it still more and then—what then?

Her noble, womanly nature revolted against her fate. She disliked the husband who lost no opportunity of showing how little he loved her. This dislike,

with one of her earnest nature, must deepen into hatred. What then? Sir Raoul saw that things must grow worse.

"If this coquette, this lovely Lady Belle, comes to Ravensmere, and the earl flirts with her, evil will ensue," he thought.

What could he do?

If one had loved the other, matters would have been easier. But it was not so; there was nothing to which he could appeal—no love, no tenderness, on which he could build even the slightest foundation. It was the husband's fault that his beautiful young wife disliked him; he had been unkind, neglectful—he had hardened her heart against himself. The earl visited on this girl the wrong that he considered Arley Ransome had done him. The dislike and contempt he had for the father were vented on the daughter; although she was quite innocent they fell on her. To him she was never his wife—Countess of Caraven, a lovely, dark-haired girl. She was simply the money-lender's daughter.

Pride, coldness, indifference, neglect, dislike, contempt, all lay between them. How were these to be bridged over or vanquished? Added to all the rest was the dissipation, the want of purpose, the indolence, the self-indulgence, that characterized Lord Caraven.

"I would rather be at the head of my regiment, facing some wild, savage horde, than here with this struggle before me," thought Sir Raoul, almost despairingly.

For her sake he must do it. He loved her very

dearly—not with a love in which was one iota of wrong; if she had been a fair young sister of his own he could not have loved her better. He rendered her true and knightly service—he admired her beauty, her grace. He saw what her husband could not see—that a whole world of passion and tenderness lay hidden beneath the cold, calm pride. He cared more for her than for anyone else living, but it was with a true and knightly love—a love that would fain have placed her where she ought to have been—in her husband's heart.

CHAPTER XXV

"LOSING MY LIFE FOR A FEW BIRDS OF MY LORD'S"

Perhaps the distress that Sir Raoul Laureston could not help feeling for the sorrows of his fair young kinswoman was too much for the weak, shattered frame, or it may have been that the air of Ravensmere did not suit him. He was not well for many weeks after his arrival. He did not actually keep his room; the earl, who was tender enough and anxious enough where his cousin was concerned, had ordered two of the largest, lightest, and most cheerful apartments in the castle to be prepared for him, and Lady Caraven was only too anxious to arrange everything most luxuriously for him. No sitting-room in the house was so comfortable as his; the fairest and most fragrant of flowers were there, the richest and ripest of fruits. Thither all the magazines and periodicals of the day were taken, and there the beautiful young mistress of the castle spent many hours that would otherwise have been most wearisome. She would take her drawing materials thither; and many charming pictures were sketched and painted in the Red Room, as Sir Raoul's sitting-room was called. She read all the new books to him; no poem or story seemed quite satisfactory to her until she had read it to him. She loved him very **dearly**; a loyal friendship existed between Lady Cara-

ven and the noble soldier whose very bravery had spoiled his life. She never wearied of asking him to tell the story of his battles over again; she never tired of listening to this great and noble man who had never been heard to boast of a brave deed—who estimated himself in so lowly a fashion.

But it was a good, pure love, born of the tenderness and purity of her own heart—a love that made her a better woman. She had not reached that "intellectual point" when a woman, because she does not like her own husband, sees no harm in liking another man; she was as true and loyal a wife as though her husband loved her most dearly. True, he did not like her; she knew that. But the idea that that could be any plea for a dishonorable love never entered her mind. She was his wife; that fact was unalterable. There might be coldness, dislike, neglect, and contempt, but she remained his wife, and, as such, even the thought of another love never came to her—she would have shrunk from it in horror. It was this noble earnestness, this loyal integrity, that made her life seem so hard to her. The love between the brave soldier and his young kinswoman was as pure and noble as they were themselves.

More than once, when she came to read to him, always bringing with her sweetest flowers and choicest fruits, he had noticed that her face was pale and her eyes were heavy with weeping. Once, as she bent over him to show him the lovely bloom on a peach, he said to her:

"Hildred, do you spend the whole night in tears?"

"Sometimes," she replied; "but, Raoul, do not talk to me about it—I would rather speak on any other subject than myself."

He respected her wish.

The quiet of Ravensmere was, indeed, broken up—the house was filled with guests. Many of them were people whom Hildred did not like; but she was compelled to be agreeable to all. There were men of the same stamp as her husband, whose whole lives seemed to be passed at the billiard-table, who had no thought except for gambling and betting, whose lives were a round of self-indulgence, who had not a noble thought or idea.

Hildred knew that there were strange revels within the honored old walls. The party generally broke up about midnight—they were sometimes rather later when they had charades or dancing; but midnight was the usual hour. Then the ladies and the wiser and steadier of the gentlemen retired to their rooms. The others, with the earl at the head of them, adjourned to the billiard-room. Long after morning dawned Hildred heard the click of the billiard balls, and she knew that all was not right. Still, she was powerless to interfere; if she had said but one word, her husband would have been passionately angry. She remembered the night in London when he had half suspected her of watching him. She would not interfere, and it was of no use telling Sir Raoul—he had enough to bear of physical pain. There was nothing for it but grim endurance.

She did not like some of the people whom the earl

had invited. If not rude, they were neglectful of her—seemed to know her position by instinct—seemed to guess that she was an unloved wife, that she had been married for her money, and had a title instead of love. She must endure it, but there were things she could not tolerate. This was one.

One morning she was quite alone in the castle. The whole party had gone out riding and driving, some of them greatly disappointed at not having their beautiful young hostess with them; but she thought Sir Raoul looked worse that morning, so would not leave him. She was busily engaged in reading to him when a servant came to say that a poor woman was waiting to see her.

"I tried to send her away, your ladyship," said the man, "but she begged so hard that I had not the heart."

"Tried to send her away! Why did you do that?" asked Lady Caraven.

"I think she is one of the tenants, your ladyship, and his lordship gave orders that they should never be attended to here—they were to be sent to Mr. Blantyre. If I have done wrong I am sorry for it."

"You have done right," she said; "no blessing ever comes to a house where the poor and the sorrowful are sent from the door."

Not even to a servant would she utter one word in disparagement of her husband, although she thought the order a cruel one.

The woman was waiting to see her in one of the ante-rooms. Lady Caraven's generous heart was

touched as she looked at her, she was so thin, so worn, with a face so white and so sad, and great, despairing eyes; her clothes were a thin, shabby dress and a still thinner and shabbier shawl.

As the young countess stood before her in all the pride of her youth and beauty, amid all the luxury of her surroundings, she felt, in some vague way, ashamed of the contrast.

"Did you want me?" she said, in a low, gentle voice. "I am Lady Caraven. Do you wish to see me?"

The thin, worn hands were clasped tightly. The woman hardly seemed to have the power of speech.

"Do not be afraid," said the young countess; "tell me what you want."

"Oh! my lady, my lady!" was the cry that seemed to come from a breaking heart, "will you take pity on me?"

"I will, indeed, if I can. If I can help you, I promise that I will. What is the matter? You must not fear to tell me. I can understand the sorrows of others, and feel for them."

The woman looked up into the kindly, beautiful face.

"I hardly know how to tell you, my lady. It is not the earl's fault. None of us blame him; he does not know it. It is all Mr. Blantyre's doing."

"But what is it?" she asked gently. "You forget that I do not know."

"My lady, it is this. My husband—a fine, strong, handsome young man—was killed here in the woods two years ago; he was a keeper, and there was a fight

with the poachers—my husband, John Woodruff, was killed. He was a fine, handsome young man, my lady, and we had three little children. I was fetched to him after he was hurt. He had been struck with the butt-end of a gun, and the doctor said that the moment he was moved he would die. So his companions fetched me to him, my lady—me with my three little children; and we saw him, in the early dawn of the morning, lying in the clover dying—dying, my lady—the dear lad who had never given me an angry word. We knelt down beside him, and he tried to raise his head to look at the children, for the last time; but he could not see them—his eyes were dim, he groped with his hand, as though he was in darkness. He neither saw them nor me, but he knew that I was there.

“‘Ellen,’ he said—and even in dying the words sounded quite clear—‘Ellen, you have been a good wife to me. I am losing my life for a few birds of my lord’s; but he will see to you. The earl will see to you—he will never let you want.’ And all the men standing round him said:

“‘That is right enough; the earl will never let you want.’

“But, my lady, it was the keepers who buried my husband—I think the earl forgot him. We lived then in a little cottage—one belonging to the earl—and, my lady, since my husband’s death I have lived there—I do not know why—rent free. Living there has been my livelihood. I have had no rent to pay, and every week I have earned a few shillings by taking in

washing for the people at Court Raven. Some weeks I have made five shillings—sometimes more. People like to send their things to me—I dry them on a hedge, my lady, near the trees, and they say the sweet smell of the firs hangs about them."

"Go on," said the young countess, gently—"I am deeply interested."

"So, my lady, the little cottage has, after a fashion, kept me and my children. But now a paper has come to say that henceforth we must pay rent—four-and-six-pence each week—for the place; and, my lady, if I pay it I shall not be able to buy bread for my children to eat."

"But you shall not pay it," said the young countess.

"Oh, my lady, heaven bless you! If you would but speak to the earl for me! He is young, and he does not think—he does not know. If you would but speak to him for me!"

Speak to her husband! Hildred had not thought of that—had not meant that. The woman went on:

"I have been to Mr. Blantyre, my lady, but he refused to hear me. He said I must pay the rent or go. Where can I go? My husband took me home to the cottage, and my little children were born there. Where can I go? What can I do? It seems hard, my lady. My poor husband died to keep a few birds alive—birds that my lord and his friends shot afterward—and now I must leave the home I love for my dear lad's sake. It is a hard world for the poor, my lady—hard and cold and cruel."

"There is another, better and brighter," said the young countess.

"Yes, my lady—I know it; but it seems hard to wait for that, hard to wait while the children are crying for bread, and there is no coal for the fire."

"I promise to help you," said Lady Caraven. "I will speak to the earl, my husband; he will let you stay without paying rent."

"I know he will—if he understands; but, my lady, Mr. Blantyre does as he likes with the poor, and the earl knows nothing about it. What could four shillings and sixpence a week matter to the earl? And my husband died to save his birds."

"I will do all I can," said the countess; "come and see me again in three days' time from now."

And Lady Caraven placed in the thin hand that which made the widow's heart beat fast for joy.

CHAPTER XXVI

"IT WOULD BE A FATAL PRECEDENT"

On the day after the poor widow's visit Lady Caraven had no opportunity of speaking to her husband. He cared little enough, as a rule, for county business, but he was compelled to attend a political meeting at Court Raven, the town which belonged almost entirely to the Ravensmere estates. He did not return until late in the evening, and she did not see him. On the day following she determined to make an opportunity. As it happened, the earl was at the breakfast-table.

"It will be easy enough," she thought now. "When breakfast is over I will ask him to spare a few minutes for me."

But, when breakfast was over, the earl went off with some gentlemen to the stables. There was a fear that his favorite horse was ill, so it was no time then to plead the widow's cause. She tried again at luncheon—it was equally in vain; and the young countess smiled to think that there should be so much difficulty in the way of speaking a word to her own husband. As a last resource she went to the Red Room.

"Raoul," she said, "Lord Caraven always comes when you want him. Will you make some excuse for sending for him? I want to speak to him very particularly, and I cannot find an opportunity."

Sir Raoul was only too pleased; he thought that the fact of her wishing to speak to him at all was a good sign. He sent for him, and in a few minutes the earl arrived, pleased, as he always was, to be of use to Sir Raoul.

The soldier talked to him for a few minutes about an imaginary want, and Lord Caraven was deeply interested. He had bowed to his wife on entering the room, but had not spoken to her; now she came up to him.

"Lord Caraven," she said, "you can spare me ten minutes? I will not detain you longer."

An expression of impatience came over his face; she saw it, and her own blanched with anger.

"Have no fear," she said, sarcastically; "it is not of myself that I wish to speak."

"I was just going out," he told her, hastily.

Her first impulse was to sweep disdainfully from the room, and never to speak to him again. For one half minute she felt that she hated him; and then she remembered that she had promised to plead the widow's cause—the widow who loved her home for "her dear lad's" sake.

"Lord Caraven," she said, gently, "I promise that I will not detain you long. Will you come with me to my room?"

The earl threw up his eyes with an expression of resignation. Only Sir Raoul saw it, and he felt annoyed.

"I will follow you," he said to his wife, and she led the way to her boudoir. It was a pretty octagon-

shaped room; the ceiling was painted, the walls were beautifully decorated, the hangings were of rich rose silk and lace, a profusion of flowers perfumed the room.

"What a lady's bower," said the earl; "flowers and lace and perfume! What a dainty little nest!"

Then it struck him that this was the first time since their marriage that he had entered any room belonging to his wife.

"I have not seen this little room before," he said; "how pretty it is."

With proud humility, with touching grace, she bowed to him.

"I am happy to make you welcome to my pretty room," she said.

The earl laughed—he always did when he wanted to avoid any exhibition of feeling.

"Hildred," he said, "you have caught just a touch of Sir Raoul's manner."

"My manner is entirely my own," she replied, proudly. "Lord Caraven, I have a favor to ask of you."

"I do not seem to know myself," declared the earl, "seated in a lady's boudoir, *tete-a-tete* with a charming woman."

"You are mocking me, my lord," she said. "If you will please to listen, I will soon release you from the *tete-a-tete*."

He laid his handsome head back on the luxurious chair, and she, looking at him, felt for half a moment a longing in her heart that all were different—that he

was at home there—that she could kneel by his side and draw the handsome face down to hers and whisper her requests. Then she felt angry with herself. What a day-dream—what a foolish day-dream about the husband who did not like her!

"Lord Caraven," she said, "I have a favor to ask from you—a great favor. Will you grant it?"

"I will hear first what it is," he replied.

Then she told him. Her heart sank as she saw his face grow dark and angry.

"Which of the servants told you that woman was here?"

"Will you tell me why you wish to know, Lord Caraven?"

"Yes; the moment I know I shall dismiss him, without a character, for disobedience."

"If he disobeyed you," she said, "I am sorry for it. But pray do not allow that to influence you against my petition."

He turned round angrily.

"Plainly speaking, Hildred," he said, "I have quite enough annoyance with my tenants without interference from you, and I cannot allow—"

"Lord Caraven," she interposed eagerly, "do believe me. I have not the least wish to interfere; but this poor woman—if you had seen her pale, hungry face and sad eyes."

"It is easy enough to look hungry," he said, impatiently.

"You do not mean that. I know you have pity and compassion for the unfortunate—I have seen you kind

and generous to them; and this poor woman's husband—and she loves him—mind, her husband, Lord Caraven, died to save your birds. Think—a man killed that a few birds may live!"

"That is your way of looking at the matter. Do you know that you are attacking the very base of society?"

"What am I attacking in this case?" she asked.

"The Game Laws—the most glorious part of the British Constitution. John Woodruff died in defense of the Game Laws, not for my birds."

"As you will," she said, gently. "You understand things of that kind better than I do. I only know how sorry I felt for the poor woman who loved her husband—loved him and lost him."

The unconscious pathos, the sweet sadness in her voice, as she uttered these words, both touched and angered him. He meant to speak gently.

"Hildred, you must not ask me to interfere. It does not do to give way to one's feelings always. I cannot interfere with my tenants. They must pay their rents."

"But," she said, pleadingly, "this is a matter of only four-and-sixpence a week—it cannot possibly hurt you."

"It is not a question of money, but of principle. As Blantyre says, if I let this woman live rent free, every widow on my estate will want to do the same. If I excuse her, I may excuse all the rest. As Blantyre says, it is a bad precedent. I might go on until every tenant on the estate found some touching and pathet-

ic reason why he should not pay any rent—then what would become of me?"

"But that is not probable; and I ask this as an especial favor. You will not refuse, I am sure."

"Blantyre especially warned me about this very matter. He said she would be coming again and again. Do you know that we could get more for the cottage if we tried?"

It was with great difficulty that she controlled herself. To grow impatient would be to lose her cause.

"Will you let me pay the rent for her, then?" she asked.

He laughed.

"If you do, we shall raise it to three hundred a year. Seriously speaking, Hildred, you must not interfere—it will not do. It would be a fatal precedent. I must absolutely forbid you to say any more."

She turned from him, her face growing pale, her lips quivering with anger. He saw it, and felt almost sorry.

"I regret to refuse you, Hildred," he said, rising to quit the room. "It is the first favor you have asked of me, and I should have liked to grant it. But I promised Blantyre faithfully that I would not interfere. We must make what we can of the estate, and we shall never do it if we interfere with Blantyre."

She raised her head with a charming air of pique and disdain.

"Pray, my lord," she said, "may I ask you if you have left your conscience in Mr. Blantyre's hands?"

"He would not have much to hold," laughed the

earl. "My conscience would go into a small space."

Her face flushed, her eyes shone brightly.

"Let me ask you, my lord," she said, "have you ever remembered that all this wealth was given to you, not for your own especial self-indulgence, but in trust for the poor and the needy?"

"I should like you to tell Blantyre that," sneered the earl. "I have never remembered anything of the kind."

"Then let me tell you it is true. I would sooner be the poorest beggar turned from your door than I would be you, with your titles, your estates, your wealth, your dead conscience, and your dead heart. Good morning, my lord."

And with an air of dignity the young countess swept from the room, leaving him dumb with rage.

CHAPTER XXVII

"YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE TO HEAVEN FOR YOUR DEPEND-
ENTS"

Lady Caraven was not naturally prone to anger, but now she trembled with rage that she should be so cruelly insulted, denied the first favor she had ever asked—denied because she took a generous interest in surely the lowliest creature on her husband's estate. It was unheard of. She did not give vent to her anger by any loud outburst of emotion. She did not pace up and down the room, clinching her hands; but she stood silent, her face pale as death, her eyes filled with angry fire. That he should dare to be unkind to her! That he should have listened with that satirical smile on his face, perhaps laughing at her in his heart! She shrank from herself.

"Heaven help me," she said, "but I am afraid that I hate him!"

Her hands trembled slightly.

"I am in a passion," she said to herself, "and no wonder. Was ever wife refused such a trifle?"

While she stood trying to stem the wild current of anger and to cool the fire that seemed to burn her heart and brain, a servant, her own maid, entered.

"My lady," she said, "the earl is seeking you. Shall I tell him that you are here?"

"If you please," she replied.

She neither moved nor stirred when the earl came in. She neither turned her beautiful head nor raised her proud eyes. He looked at the tall, slender figure, so unbending, so defiant.

"Hildred," he said, sharply, "I wish to speak to you."

She did not even raise her white eyelids or give the faintest sign that she had heard him.

"I wish to speak to you," he repeated, more sharply.

"I can hear," said Lady Caraven. "Speak on."

"But I do not choose to speak, madam, unless you give me your attention."

Never did empress of old turn a haughtier face to her foe than she turned now to him—proud, defiant, unbending.

"I would not submit to him now," she thought, "if I must die for it."

She might have stood as a statue of pride.

"Listen to me," said the earl. "I have been thinking over what you said, and I do not like it. Do you hear? I do not like it."

She answered never a word.

"Do not irritate me," he said. "I am not always master of myself. I—I have a good temper generally, but when I am angry I forget myself. Do not irritate me."

"I have no wish to irritate you," she replied, with quiet dignity. "Say what you have to say that I may go quickly."

"I have to say this, Lady Caraven, that you must

not speak to me again as you have done to-day—never; I cannot permit it. The wealth of Ravensmere is yours, not mine; but the right to manage my tenants is mine, and I will allow no one to dictate to me."

"The right to manage them is most certainly yours, but I contend that they are cruelly mismanaged, and that the wrongs done to the poor on your estate will recoil on your own head, as will the waste, the extravagance, and the folly."

"I am willing that they should. Still I will take anything but advice, and that least of all from you, Lady Caraven, although you may think that you have the best right to give it. I have no wish to repeat any angry words, but you must understand once and for all that I brook no dictation."

She bowed to him.

"Is that all you wished to say, my lord?"

He looked at the beautiful white proud face, so still, so full of repressed feeling.

"I should like to ask you," he said, "why you dislike Mr. Blantyre so much? You have seen little of him, yet you distrust him."

"I do," she replied, quietly. "I did the first time I saw him. He commits positive cruelties in your name and then lays all at your door. 'It is the earl's orders,' he says; and under the sanction of your name—a name that ought to be honored and revered—I say that great cruelties, acts of great injustice are committed."

"How am I to know that it is true?" he asked.

"Go yourself among the people and ask. You will see men with large families and eighteen shillings a

week to support them with, whose rents have been raised one pound a year—their rents, not their wages; those are the laborers employed on your estate—the hewers of wood and drawers of water—the poorest, the most wretched class of men in England.”

“That is not Blantyre’s fault. You would revolutionize society,” he said, interested in spite of himself by the passion of her words.

“I know it is not Blantyre’s fault. If one of the children of a household goes wrong, it is not the hired servant who is to blame, but the father and mother. I know it is not Blantyre’s fault; but at the great day, when the wasted lives and the broken hearts of these people cry out for vengeance, we shall know whose fault it was.”

He shrank from the clear gaze of the glowing, eloquent eyes.

“While we are speaking about it,” she continued in the same tone of repressed passion, “I will tell you what I think. Heaven placed you in a high position and intrusted you with vast wealth; the lives, the interests, and the well-being of innumerable dependents lie in your hands. What have you done?”

He shrank as though the hand raised in warning had struck him.

“What have you done?” continued the voice, so pitilessly sweet. “You have had but one object and that has been to make the most you could out of them, to swell your own income, no matter at what cost to them. You have never studied their interests. Neither their bodies nor their souls have had any care from you. Is that right?”

"That is all nonsense," he replied, more startled than he would have cared to own. "You are looking at the matter from a preacher's point of view."

"No; I look at it as any sensible person would look at it. A great land-owner is a great power. He holds a great trust in his hands—life and death are almost in his gift. You have been extravagant, without a thought save of self-indulgence, knowing naught but your own pleasure. Shall I tell you what you ought to be?"

He was silenced by her passion and eloquence—he had no anger, no impatience left.

"You can tell me what you like," he replied.

"I will tell you. Even as a great king is the father of his people, so should a great landlord be. You ought to make the interests of the people your own. When the two clash, you should give way. Their cares and sorrow should in some measure be yours. You should have wise compassion, prudent forbearance, unlimited self-control. You should know how to reward the good, to punish the bad. Every child born on your estate has an immortal soul—you should provide churches, schools, and libraries. You should know where to give in charity, where to withhold your hand. You should know that the health and in some measure the morals of the people you govern are in your hands, flourishing or otherwise, according to the houses you give them to live in. I do not say altogether, but in great measure you are responsible to heaven for your dependents, your laborers, your servants, the poor at your gates."

He stood perfectly still, listening intently.

"Have you finished, Hildred?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "All that I say is in vain; therefore I will say no more."

She did not wait to hear what reply he would make—it would have been better had she done so—but she swept from the room.

It was a humiliation for her when Ellen Woodruff came again, to tell her that she had failed in the mission—that, even at her solicitation, the earl had refused the little boon she asked. She would have given much if she could have shown even to this poor widow some proof of his desire to please her—but she could not.

She was one of those people who never defer a disagreeable duty. She sent that same day for the poor creature, who came trembling for the fate of herself and her children. Lady Caraven received her very kindly, but entered at once into the matter.

"I am sorry to tell you," she said, "that I have failed. Lord Caraven does not feel inclined to forego the rent."

"It is not my lord," cried the woman. "I know it is not. It is Mr. Blantyre's fault; he said I should and must pay. But I cannot, my lady; I have not the means."

"I have thought it all over," said Lady Caraven. "I cannot get the cottage rent free for you, but I can pay the rent. I will give it to you every month, but it must be on the condition that you tell no one. Lord Caraven might be displeased if he heard it."

It was humiliating at first to give charities unknown to her husband, and then beg that they might be kept secret. The gratitude of the poor woman in some measure compensated her, and made her feel less miserable.

But, though Lord Caraven had laughed and sneered and spoken angrily, he had not forgotten his wife's words. Not for the world would he have owned it, or that they had made the least impression on him—on the contrary, he was, if possible, more brusque and abrupt, quoted Blantyre more frequently, and talked more than ever of what he would do with the poor tenants—yet her words haunted him. They seemed to be written in letters of fire, let him turn his eyes whither he would.

As to Hildred, her humiliation had been great. She was fast losing heart and patience; her hope had died a lingering death—there was no gleam of comfort left her, turn which way she might. Sir Raoul was ill, and seldom able to leave his room. Owing to the number of guests in the house, she could not spend so much time with him as formerly. She was dispirited and depressed. Above all, she disliked some of the visitors whom Lord Caraven had invited. There was one who was young, effeminate, weak in character, not much stronger in mind—a Lieutenant Hilstone, who had just succeeded to a large fortune, and who seemed at a loss how to get rid of it most quickly. Lady Caraven had a shrewd suspicion that some of the visitors did not scruple as to how much they won from him. More than once she had over-

heard heavy wagers made with him which she knew he must lose. She was scornfully impatient. Was not this conduct of her husband's disgraceful—to allow gambling and betting under his roof—to allow a weak young soldier like the lieutenant to be what she considered robbed?

One of the earl's most intimate friends—one, indeed, who knew all his affairs—was Sir Arthur Oldys; and Hildred overheard him, quite by chance, one day, laying a heavy wager with the young lieutenant. She looked at him calmly.

"Sir Arthur," she said, "I do not consider that it is quite fair; Lieutenant Hilstone has no chance. You know more than he does when you lay such a wager—you know that you will win it."

She never forgot the sneer with which he turned to her.

"Lady Caraven," he said, "permit me to offer my congratulations. You understand money matters almost as well as your talented father."

CHAPTER XXVIII

"OUR LIVES ARE VERY MUCH WHAT WE OURSELVES MAKE
THEM"

Without replying to Sir Arthur Oldys' insult, without word or comment, Lady Caraven instantly quitted the room, her heart burning with hot indignation. How well her husband's friends must know that he did not love her! They would never dare to speak to her as they did but for that knowledge. How well they must know it, when they dared to try to insult her through her father!

Yet she was powerless to resent it. If she complained to the earl, he would at once take part against her—beside her own pride would not permit her to do so. They might insult her as they would; it was not from him that she would seek protection. They must have seen that, after all, she was but the nominal mistress of the house—that she was but a kind of head housekeeper—Countess of Caraven in name, but in reality a neglected, unloved, despised wife. She understood how and why these gentlemen failed in respect; her husband had set them the example.

Lady Caraven felt something like despair. Was such a life, after all, worth having? Was her title worth undergoing so much for? She was living without hope, without love, without happiness, subject to

much impertinence. Surely life was not ~~usual~~ like this, or why did people talk of its brightness, its beauty? There was nothing to which she clung in the life she was leading. She would have separated herself from Ravensmere, and all that it contained—except Sir Raoul—without a sigh; it was even worse than that—she disliked all belonging to it.

Why should she submit any longer? She would rather be a governess, rudely treated by an upstart woman, than a countess neglected and despised by her own husband, and insulted by his friends. She would rather forego every luxury and work for her daily bread, than bear this life any longer. Why should she? The earl had married her for her money; now he had it—nothing could take it from him. Her father had sold her for a title; he could call himself the father of Lady Caraven—nothing could undo that. But she was indisposed any longer to be the victim of both. She would seek her freedom and would find it.

She walked with head erect, with flushed face and angry eyes, through the splendid rooms. They were all more or less occupied. In the library some gentlemen were writing letters—the billiard-room was always engaged—the ladies of the party occupied different apartments. It seemed to her that nowhere could she find peace. Her whole soul was in a fever of unrest, a tumult of sadness and weariness. Her heart ached, her head throbbed.

She longed, with desperate longing, for a few minutes' repose; it seemed to her that her life was hurrying on like a swift river into an unknown

sea. She wanted to stop and see whither it was going. Everywhere there was the same noise—the deep voices and deep laughter of men, the light tones and gay laughter of women. There was not a spot in the whole place for rest. She pressed her hands against the temples that throbbed so violently. She looked around her half irresolutely. Whither should she go? Then she bethought herself of the pleasaunce—the only spot where she could even imagine herself alone.

The pleasaunce must have been constructed by someone who knew how human nature longed for rest. Few of the Ravensmere people knew of its existence—the visitors did not. Some of the servants were in perfect ignorance as to its whereabouts. It was constructed for the sole and exclusive use of the Ladies Caraven. Rumor told strange stories of one of the daughters of the house who had been born with a deformity in the face, so terrible that she was unfit for human eyes to gaze on. The earl, her father, never permitted her to leave the house, and this little garden had been constructed entirely for her use. It was inclosed between four high walls, and those walls were covered with a luxuriant growth of ivy. No windows, no towers, overlooked the garden. The paths were broad and straight, the whole place was a wilderness of flowers.

The young countess bethought herself of this retreat. She had one key of the dark green door that led to it; Sir Raoul had another. She would go thither, she said to herself, and look her life in the

face, and then decide what to do with it. It was slowly dawning across her that she would not be able to bear her trials much longer; that she could not and would not endure them; that there was a brighter life somewhere, which she was determined to find out; that she could not sacrifice her whole life to a shadow of duty; that, in fact, she would go forth free.

Free! The very word made her heart beat quickly. Free! She would no longer be tied to the man whose indolence, whose self-indulgence, whose cold indifference and neglect, whose utter want of interest in his duties, irritated and annoyed her every hour of the day; to the handsome, indolent man who allowed fever and disease to run riot in the cottages belonging to him, while he wrung from the tenants all that he could get; who abandoned every duty and was satisfied to leave the most solemn of his engagements to a man like John Blantyre.

She was tired of it. She would be free—free to go whither she would. Why should she remain? Her father had deceived her—he had told her that she could live without love, that nothing was of any worth except rank, wealth, and position. She had found it to be untrue. Looking back now, she regretted bitterly that she had not decided otherwise, and had not refused to live without love.

She went to the pleasaunce. If she were interrupted there, it could be only by her husband or Sir Raoul; there was no fear of other intruders. A sense of relief came to her when she found herself between the four high walls. The blue sky smiled down upon her,

the languid air stirred faintly, the scent of roses came to her on the wind; it was like a reprieve to enter that quiet retreat, and feel alone.

She walked down one of the broad, straight paths to where crimson carnations grew side by side with white lilies, and there she seated herself to rest—alone. And it was so sweet to be alone. There was no sound of men's voices or of light laughter; no sneer could reach her where she was; there was nothing but the blue sky above, and the breath of the sweet western wind. She was shut out from all sounds—alone, with the thread of her life in her hands.

It was a dreary tangle, a miserable disappointment. She was tired and weary. Looking back, she thought she must have been mad to sacrifice herself as she had done; married for her money, sold for a title, her own will, her own womanhood, had never asserted itself. Her handsome, indolent husband did nothing but treat her with indifference and contempt. She could do nothing for him. He was on the way to ruin. How could she arrest him? His whole life was a round of senseless pleasure from which she could never divert him. He had all that he wanted—her money. Now surely she could go free—free, to lead a more congenial life, where she would not live in the midst of annoyances and vexations.

She would go and live in France or Italy—anywhere away from England! Her father might be angry. She would not heed it. He had shown but little love for her; she would not consider him. The only regret she felt—and it was a deep one—was for Sir Raoul.

Sir Raoul, the only human being who cared for her—what would he say when he knew that she was going? He would miss her so terribly; but, even for his sake, dear as he was to her, she could not stay. He would miss her, he who loved her with a true, loyal love; but she would tell him how wretched she was, how utterly miserable, and then he would see that she must go.

Suddenly—she could not tell why—the self-command of long years broke down. Her pride, her courage, her high spirit, the proud sense of resentment that had sustained her, broke down, and she wept as she had seldom wept in her life before. The passionate tears seemed to relieve her. It was a luxury to weep there alone—for once to give herself up to a full sense of her misery, of her disappointment, of her blighted life—for once to dare to look the truth full in the face and own to herself that she was one of the most miserable, most wretched girls in the whole wide world.

She sobbed out the words. It was a relief to say them—a relief to say even to herself that she was miserable; she had been so proudly reticent, so self-restrained.

Suddenly a hand was laid upon her shoulder, and, looking up, she saw Sir Raoul standing by her side. In his pale face, worn with pain and suffering, she saw infinite pity, infinite love; compassion and tenderness shone in his eyes. He had never looked so true and so noble as he did just then. He bent over her.

"Hildred, poor child, is it so bad as this?" he asked.

"It is so bad," she said, "that it could not be worse, Raoul—nothing could be worse. I am tired of it. I am going away."

"Going away!" he repeated, slowly. "That is what I feared. Has your patience, your forbearance, come to an end at last, Hildred?"

"Yes," she replied, truthfully, "it has at last."

He was silent for a few minutes, and then, as she looked up at him, a great awe stole over her. His eyes were raised to the clear skies, his lips moved.

Surely in a picture she had seen a figure something like his, with a serene light on the brow. Her anger, her impatience, her bitter contempt and dislike seemed to fall away from her, even from that one look at his face. She rose suddenly into something nobler than a weeping, vengeful, unhappy woman.

"You are going away, Hildred—you can bear it no longer? Poor child! This reminds me of an hour I spent once with a soldier who was determined to desert his post and fly."

"I am not a soldier," she said, with a more pitiful smile.

"We will talk it over," he replied; and he seated himself by the crimson carnations at her side. "I will tell you all I think," he said, "and we will talk it over; then you shall decide."

She was trying to harden her heart against him, to say to herself that, no matter what he thought, urged, or said, it should make no difference—she would go away. He was sensitive and proud, he was

tender of heart, but how could he understand her case? That which tortured her was nothing to him.

He looked at her with the same sweet, noble compassion that seemed to her almost more than human.

"Hildred," he said, in a low voice, "will you trust me wholly? Will you tell me the true story of your marriage?"

"Do you not know it, Raoul? It seems to me so shameful I have no wish to repeat it."

"I know something of it," he replied; "but not the whole truth. I know that you will tell it to me. I ask you as a physician asks. I must know the whole truth before I can advise. Tell me one thing—did you love your husband at all before your marriage?"

"No," she replied; "not in the least."

"Will you tell me again why you, a woman naturally noble, naturally tender and true of heart, married without love?"

She glanced at him, her beautiful face full of perplexity; she had gathered a crimson carnation, and was holding it between her slender fingers.

"I will tell you, Raoul. I asked my father if love were necessary for happiness, and he said 'No.' I believed him; hence my mistake."

"Your father deceived you."

"He did deceive me," she replied.

He looked at the downcast face.

"Hildred," he said, gently, "I do not remember that I have ever met with a more thorough woman than you. You have all a woman's tenderness of heart, quickness of instinct, fertility of imagination, grace

of mind—your ideas and thoughts are all womanly and true. How could you be so false to your whole nature as to believe that even when your father told it to you?"

"I cannot tell. As you say, my own innate perceptions ought to have told me it was false, but they did not. One reason is that I had thought so little of the matter. I loved study and books; romance seldom, if ever, came into my thoughts. I had no girl friends to converse with. If ever I thought of love at all, it was as of some bright fairyland that all the world sought, but few ever reached. I asked my father if one could live happily without love. He told me 'Yes'—even more happily—that love was a fever which burned and fretted. He said that the calmest, the most peaceful of lives were those in which love had no share."

"And you believed him?"

"Yes; I told him what poets and novelists said—how a great poet had said it was better 'to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.' He declared it was all nonsense, 'the poet's trade, the writer's art,' until—believe me, Raoul—I half thought it a noble thing to live without love. Then—let me be quite frank—the notion of being a countess pleased me. Let me even be more frank. I saw Lord Caraven, and liked him. He looked handsome and fascinating—he seemed to differ from the German professors or the city men with whom I was familiar. I liked him, and I made a great mistake."

"Will you tell me what the mistake was, Hildred?"

Yes. I knew nothing of money matters—I did not even know that I was a great heiress—and I was foolish enough to think that he must have seen me somewhere and have liked me—that he must have admired me or he would not have wished to marry me."

"Poor child!" he said, with a grave, pitying face.

"I could not understand it," she continued; "no one was ever so puzzled. I could not help noticing his indifference and his reserve, but I thought that would all die away. Every day I was expecting to hear that he had had some reason for his coldness—some reason that had passed away. Every day I expected to hear the secret of his indifference. I hoped against hope—you see how frankly I am speaking, Sir Raoul—and then I awoke to the sure and certain conviction that he not only did not love me but that he absolutely disliked me."

"Poor child!" said the grave voice again.

"Yes, I was deeply to be pitied. I was sorry even for myself. What made it worse was that at that time I was beginning to care very much for my husband. If he had been kind to me I should have loved him. Now"—and, stopping suddenly, she wrung her hands in terrible despair. "Now," she continued, "I dislike him—I almost hate him."

The beautiful face flushed hotly—the dark eyes were full of a strange light.

"I am alarmed at myself," she went on. "I did not know that it was within me—this power of hatred. I am so frightened that I am going away, Raoul. My patience has failed me."

"It is a sad story. Tell me, Hildred—why does your patience fail? I love Ulric—I love you; I can judge between you. Why does your patience fail?"

"I do not want to speak evil of my husband," she replied, slowly; "the very fact that he has injured me should make me generous to him—the very fact that I dislike him should compel me to speak well of him. I love a noble foe."

"If you were a foe at all, you would be a noble one," he said; "but you are not. You may speak frankly, because you are speaking to one who loves Ulric Caraven in spite of his faults. Tell me honestly all about your dislike."

She was silent for some minutes, and the crimson leaves of the clove-carnation fell one by one to the ground.

"I do not like speaking of it," she began. "You must see, Raoul, as well as I do—you must understand. How could anyone help despising and disliking a man who lives for himself, who cares for nothing but his own pleasure, and leaves every duty neglected? How can I love a man who married me only for my money, despising me the while?—who has not since marriage shown me the ordinary civility that a gentleman never fails to show to a lady? He is selfish, indolent—oh, Raoul! I do not like saying this, but if you saw his cruel neglect, his cruel oppression—if you knew how carelessly he leaves everything to John Blantyre, how heedless he is as to the claims of justice, you would be sorry for me!"

"I see," he replied, quietly. "Now tell me, Hildred

—I know you will speak quite frankly—do you see one redeeming quality amid all your husband's faults?"

She thought long before she answered him, and then she looked into his face.

"I am afraid not—I do not remember one. Yes, there is one; I have never heard him speak falsely."

Sir Raoul's face cleared.

"Ulric was a truthful boy," he said. "Do you know of anything else in his favor?"

She thought again.

"I think," she replied, even more slowly, "that he is tender-hearted. He is not cruel; he does not like to see people suffer; he is cruel only to me."

"True in word and tender of heart—those are two good qualities; we know that he has a handsome face, an easy grace of manner, a musical voice. You see I am trying to discover his good qualities. I will tell you something else. He is a spendthrift—I do not deny it. He may oppress the poor on his estate—that I am sure is done unwittingly; but he has never yet refused to help a comrade in distress. Years ago, when I was a hard-working soldier with nothing to rely on but my pay, if I would have borrowed, he would have lent me half his fortune. He is open-handed."

"Yes," she replied. Sir Raoul smiled.

"Listen again, Hildred. He has done all kinds of foolish, mad, senseless actions; but no one ever told of him that he had done a mean one."

"It was mean to demand rent from the poor widow whose husband was killed in his service."

"I am perfectly certain that John Blantyre has misled him," was the reply.

"It was mean to marry me for my money," she said, with flushing face.

"Ah! there I must yield. It was mean—it was, in one sense, the worst action of his life," said Sir Raoul. "Let us make a *resume*, Hildred. He is true in word, tender of heart; he was never cruel; he is open-handed; he has committed but one mean action; he is handsome and accomplished, well-fitted to win the heart of any woman. Tell me—do you think it quite impossible to love such a character?"

"I can hardly tell," she replied, slowly.

"I think that Ulric Caraven has in him the elements of a noble character, Hildred. Give to a sculptor a block of shapeless marble, and what does he fashion from it?"

"A beautiful statue," she replied.

"True. Given a shapeless mass of qualities, good and bad intermixed, I say that a good woman from them can mold a beautiful character. Listen—I will tell you how."

He had drawn nearer to her and the leaves of the crimson carnation fell at his feet; the western wind seemed to pause and listen—it fell with a faint, subdued sigh.

"Listen," he repeated; and there was a grave, sweet music in his voice that overawed her. "Our lives, Hildred, are very much what we ourselves make them; your case is, I grant, an exceptional one—your fate has, in some measure, been decided for you; but your ultimate destiny lies in your own hands."

She murmured faintly that she knew it, and that she was unhappy in the knowledge. He went on.

"Your life lies before you now, divided into two paths. Granted that you have been victimized, that you have been married for your money, that you have been sold, as it were, for a title, that your girlish romance and your womanly tenderness have been alike outraged, that you have been deceived, persuaded that you could live happily without love, and that you find it all a mistake."

"Yes," she repeated, "all a mistake."

"Some girls in your place," he continued, "would revenge themselves. Having no home happiness to fall back on, having no home love, they would rush into excess of gayety and flirtation. There are some who would do even worse than that—who would seek abroad the love they did not find at home—I speak quite frankly to you—but you are too good, too pure, too true to think or dream of such a thing."

She made him no answer; but Sir Roaul did not seem to heed that. He went on:

"You have borne your fate bravely as yet, but now you have tired of it; your courage and patience have failed—you have told me so, and I can plainly see that in your own mind you are seeking some means of escape. Is it not so?"

"Yes," she answered, "I must go away."

"That would be a commonplace ending, after all—running away from your trouble. Hildred, I can see how you may make yourself a heroine—how you may rise from this, your girlish, dissatisfied life, to the

grandest heights of heroism. I see it, and, unless I am greatly mistaken in my estimate of your character, you will do it; it is better to die on the heights of heroism, than in the depths of despair."

She looked up at him with a gleam of interest in her face. She had been so long without hope that to be told she could be heroic awoke within her a feeling of wonder.

"There are two ways before you—that of fighting against your fate, rebelling with all your heart against it, and that of submitting to it and making the best of it. You may, for instance, leave Lord Caraven. You have money in abundance, you could live either in England or abroad, you could have plenty of society—but you would never be happy. You might try to throw your whole heart and soul into the gayeties and frivolities of the world—they would tire you; you are too noble for that. Then the chances are that when you found all these things pall upon you, you would want to lead the woman's true life, which is that of love. Of all fates that would be the most dreadful which could overtake you."

"I am not afraid of it," she replied, slowly.

"So you think now; but I am one of those who believe that no woman can live without love. If you should ever, when the world had tired you and your heart ached with the weight of your loneliness, seek comfort or consolation in the love of any creature, your fate would be terrible. Picture yourself so situated—a woman beautiful, gifted, and brilliant, married, yet with no husband by her side; all duties of

rank and position ignored; mistress of a home that she never saw; beautiful, yet miserable with the never-failing consciousness that she had run away from a life that might have been improved. It is a sorry picture for a noble woman, a sorry ending for a life that might have been heroic."

"Yes," she agreed, "a sorry ending."

"Now look on the other side—submission to your fate. Believe this—whether he knows it or not, every man is more or less influenced by a woman; every sensible man will own it—will own frankly that he owes the better part of his character to the influence of a noble woman."

She raised her eyes with wonder in their glance to his face.

"I thought," she said, "that men affected to despise the influence of women."

"Not true men. You may take it as a safe rule for guidance that when a man rails against women he is no gentleman. He may be a *parvenu*, a snob, an ignoramus; be sure of one thing—he is no gentleman. The first instinct of a gentleman is chivalry. The man who has none should lay no claim to that title. Believe me, Hildred, most great and wise men owe the greater part of their wisdom to the influence of good and noble women. It is the grandest influence in the world"—and the soldier raised his noble head proudly. "I need not quote history to you—you are better versed in it than I am. I need not quote biography or poetry, nor point to the man who said that he owed all his success in life to his mother, nor to the man who

owned that he owed all his goodness to his wife. It is the same story. I feel inclined sometimes to think that the grandest of God's gifts to this fair earth is the influence of good and noble women."

His eyes brightened, his face flushed, he spoke like a knight of old. She looked up at him with wondering awe.

"You may run away and leave your home, Hildred; but that will be a commonplace ending. Do that which is nobler, higher, better—resign yourself, submit to your fate and make the best of it. As a handsome and noble woman, use your influence with your husband to rouse him from his slough of despond into a higher life."

"How can I influence Lord Caraven?" she asked.

"You can do it by patience and perseverance. Say to yourself that the task of your life shall be to make him a good man. Instead of running away from it, devote yourself to it. There is much said of woman's mission—let that be yours; and surely there can be no higher or holier mission than to rouse an indolent man to a sense of his duty, a selfish man from his self-indulgence."

"But how could I do it, Raoul?" she asked.

"You could do it in some fashion. The well-being—nay, the very souls of men lie in women's hands. Here is a life-long task for you—a glorious mission, a noble work. Give your life to your husband—to the task of awakening him to a sense of his duties—to the task of making him a good man and a useful member of society, a conscientious steward of great

wealth, a just land-owner; teach him how to be kind and just and merciful, help him to lead a fair and noble life. Could any woman wish for a more glorious task than this?"

Some of the light that shone on his face was reflected on hers.

"It would be a noble task," she said, thoughtfully. "Could I accomplish it, Raoul?"

"With perseverance and self-control that would amount to heroism you might," he replied. "You must be the sculptor who from a mass of qualities, good and bad intermixed, must try to produce a perfect character."

"But," she said, half doubtfully, "he does not love me."

"That does not matter. I prophesy that he will love you in the end—that when you have roused his soul from its sleep it will turn to you naturally as the sunflower turns to the sun. Do you not foresee it, Hildred?" And an almost saintly enthusiasm shone on his face.

"It is possible, Raoul, but—"

"Nay, be brave. You must not even think of the word 'but.' You must be enthusiastic over it—nothing can be done without enthusiasm. You must give yourself up to it as a missionary does to the conversion of the heathen, as a martyr does to his death. You must work for it, live for it, die for it. Have you the courage and the constancy for this, Hildred?"

The light was deepening on her face, the fire in her eyes. The passion of his words was beginning to tell upon her.

"I have both the courage and the constancy," she replied.

"Think of the difference in the ending," he said. "Imagine the earl on his death-bed, tortured by the ghosts of those whom he has neglected, by the ghosts of duties left undone, ready to curse the young wife who, by flying from him and leaving him to his own devices, had hastened his ruin, body and soul—picture that. Then fancy to yourself the earl on his death-bed, blessing the dear wife, the noble woman who saved him from ruin, who woke his soul from its long sleep, who taught him how to live and how to die. Could you hesitate for one moment between these two pictures?"

"No, not for one moment, Raoul. I do not hesitate—I will not hesitate. I will do my life's work."

"That is well said. You must resolve to overcome all difficulties—you must say to yourself from the beginning that nothing shall daunt you. You will think that I am preaching to you; but, although I have been only a rough soldier, I have seen a great deal of life, and I have come to the conclusion that if women, instead of studying medicine, quarreling over votes, and attending public meetings, would devote themselves to cultivating the best qualities of their husbands, the world would be better than it is."

"Reforming their husbands instead of the British Constitution," put in Hildred, smiling. But he had spoken in solemn earnestness and could not understand her smile.

"I cannot tell you," he said, gravely, "how highly

I think of you for having made me this promise. When in the years to come I see the man whom I loved as a boy esteemed, honored, and respected, I shall bless your name even as he will."

A faint smile parted her lips.

"Raoul," she said, "you seem very certain as to my success. You have no fear that I shall fail?"

"No. Those who set to work with thorough good will seldom fail," he replied; and there was something in his quaint, earnest simplicity which carried her with him.

"I do not say for one moment that you will have all plain sailing," he continued. "Indeed, frankly speaking, I know no man is easily turned from such fatal habits of self-indulgence as Lord Caraven has contracted—it is a work of time and of patience, of almost infinite love. And you know my opinion of it," he went on; "it is the grandest of all missions that a woman can undertake. The apostle of the household has a task as exalted as that of the apostle of the heathen."

She pondered his words in silence, broken only by the western wind, as it bent the heads of the roses, and shook the white acacia-blossoms on to the grass.

It was Hildred who with a little cry broke the silence as she looked into Sir Raoul's face.

"We have forgotten one thing," she said; "we have decided that Ulric's reformation must be attempted, that it is a good thing to undertake; but you have not told me how it is to be set about."

"Your own instincts will tell you that. Will you

let me speak quite freely to you, Hildred, and promise me that you will not be offended with one single word that I shall say?"

She raised her dark eyes to his.

"You are so good, Raoul," she cried, "that I am quite sure you could never displease me, say what you might; indeed, I look upon it rather as a luxury than otherwise to be scolded by you."

"This is not scolding. You ask me how you are to win your husband. I will tell you. We start from this point—that a great wrong has been done you, but that you are too noble to seek revenge."

Her face cleared.

"I want no revenge," she replied.

"Good," said Sir Raoul; "a wrong has been done you, but you will not retaliate—you are even willing to return good for evil. The first thing you have to do, Hildred, is to lay aside that proud, injured, defiant expression that you always assume when your husband is near."

"Do I?" she asked in wonder.

"Yes; you are perhaps bright, animated, charming, when he enters the room, but the next moment you are like a woman turned to stone; a proud chill seems to come over you, to freeze you, your eyes grow cold, all the smiles die from your lips—you are as different in his presence as sunlight is from darkness."

"How can I help it when I know that he does not like me?" she asked, piteously.

"It is difficult, I admit, but heroism will do much. Now, I know such a manner upsets him; he does not

like it. You may say that as he does not care for you, your manner can make no difference."

"I should most certainly have thought so," was her reply.

"But you are wrong, Hildred. I have watched him very keenly, and I say that you are quite wrong. When you draw that cold mask over your face you harden his heart against you."

"It is always hard for me," she said.

"Then you make it worse—I have seen it. When you are proud and defiant, he tries to show you that he does not care, that it is of no moment to him; he says things to you that he would never say if you were gentler. Shall I give you an example of what I mean? The other morning you were in my room; you had brought me some beautiful flowers—you were like an angel of goodness to me—your face was bright, your lips were smiling, your eyes glad. I was thinking to myself how fair and graceful you were, how above all other women you were calculated to brighten a man's heart and his home. You were holding a spray of mignonette in your hand, telling me how fragrant it was, and inventing all kinds of pretty fancies in connection with it. Ulric came in—do you remember?"

She bent her head, and her face flushed.

"I do remember," she assented, shyly.

"He saw the mignonette in your hands, and bent forward to look at it. 'It is the sweetest flower that blows,' he said. The cold mask in a moment fell over your face, and I saw you—mind, I saw you—

throw the pretty spray away as though it had stung you."

She clasped her white hands with a pretty air of penitence.

"It was very wrong, Raoul, I know; I have no excuse."

"Then Ulric, in his turn, said something about ladies' airs which you did not like. You swept out of the room, and the next time you met neither of you spoke."

"How closely you have observed me!" she said, with a hot flush on her face.

"Because I love both you and Ulric so dearly," he replied. "Now for my illustration, Hildred. Suppose that, instead of throwing away the flower that he liked, you had looked up into his face and had said something gay, or graceful, or pretty; he would have returned a smiling answer, and all would have been well; and the next time you met he would have been even more smiling and you more kind."

"But, Raoul," she asked, "would that have been sincere? I do not feel kind or pleased—is it sincere to affect to be so?"

"You ought to feel kind—he is your own husband. All that I can say is that you should try to feel so, whether you do or not. Now begin this very day; throw off that stony mask forever. How is he to know what a tender soul is hidden by that freezing face unless you give him some chance of finding it out? Do not say to yourself that you will begin to-morrow or the day after—begin at once. Say to yourself that you will win him."

"Is it not unwomanly to seek for love which is not offered to you, Raoul?"

"It might be in a girl, it is not in a wife. I think a wife should aspire to win her husband, to make him love her with all his heart."

"Lord Caraven will never love me," she said. "I do not think that he has any heart to give; it is all wasted—he has had a hundred loves."

"But not one real one, Hildred. If you win his heart, take my word for it, you will be his first love. We will take our stand on something higher. To win love is pleasant, but you shall not devote your life to that. You shall devote yourself to the rousing of a soul, naturally noble, but long buried in self-indulgence and folly; you shall spend your life in making the Earl of Caraven worthy of the name he bears. You have promised."

"I promise again," she replied.

"Ah, child, you know but little, after all, of what you will have to encounter! But a true soldier never deserts his post, he dies doing his duty. You will have many sore humiliations, many bitter hours of annoyance, many a contest with your own pride, but you will win in the end—of that I am sure—and we shall begin our new life, Hildred, to-day."

She had clasped her hands together, and she looked at him with piteous entreaty.

"I wish," she said, "that you would tell me what to do first. I could go on if I only knew how to begin."

He smiled gravely.

"Perhaps you would think my first lesson a very hard one," he said.

"I will do what you tell me, Raoul, let it be what it may."

"Then I shall suggest this. You wish to make a little advance—nothing very marked, but some trifling act of civility that will make amends, and show your desire to be what children call 'friends.'"

He did not know what an effort it cost her to say "Yes," but she did say it, and she meant it.

"Then this is what I suggest. It was about a spray of mignonette that you displeased Ulric last. Gather some beautiful sprays of it, the finest you can obtain, and take them to him. Say quite carelessly, 'You admire mignonette, so I have brought you this.'"

"And suppose," said Hildred, "that he repays me in kind by throwing it away?"

"Never mind—courage and patience must be your watchwords. Ah, Hildred, after all, our likes and dislikes should have little to do with our duties! You will not be alone in your struggles; I shall watch over you, I shall help you, and sympathy is sweet."

She caught his hand and kissed it. He saw her face clear and a bright, earnest light shine in her eyes.

"Do you know, Raoul," she said, "that I feel happier even now before I have begun? I did not like the thought of running away; there was something very cowardly about it. Now I shall never think of it again. I shall endure to the very end. I am happier even for the resolve. I have something to live for—

"‘Something to live for, life to begin;
Something to fight for, something to win.’

I must be more patient than patience itself. I must be humble; all vanity and self-esteem must leave me before I begin the task that you have set me. I must rise from the commonplace to the heroic, and say to myself, it is for the good of a human soul."

"Hildred, you do not know how often I have longed to speak to you about this," he remarked—"to help you, to advise you; and now that you have given me the privilege I shall not be slow to avail myself of it."

It is wonderful how the expression of the beautiful face had changed during that quiet interview. She arose with the gayest, sweetest laugh he had ever heard from her lips.

"I am a Woman with a Mission," she said, "and I shall always think of myself with capital letters. Raoul, I cannot be grateful enough to you. When you first entered the house I felt as though heaven had sent me a friend. If happiness comes to me through following your counsel, how shall I thank you?"

"I shall need no thanks, Hildred," he replied. "You are and have been, ever since I first saw you, the dearest object on earth to me. You are my dear sister, Ulric's wife. I have loved Ulric all my life—I could not help loving you."

"Now I am going to practice my first lesson in humility," she said. "Raoul, I wish that you could be in the room when I give my husband the mignon-ette."

"That would spoil it all," he replied, laughingly; "and he is so quick, so keen, he would find out at once that the little scene had been arranged between us."

"Then I must venture all by myself, I suppose," said Lady Caraven. "I feel as shy as—I cannot tell you what. Raoul, if he is cross or contemptuous I shall lose heart."

"No, you will not. Having once put your hand to the plow, you will not turn back. When your hope or your courage fails you, say to yourself, 'I have to win my husband's heart'—that will give you all your courage again."

She walked slowly down the path, Sir Raoul by her side. She looked round on the four high ivied walls.

"I have always loved this little pleasaunce," she said. "I shall love it better than ever now. It will seem almost like a church to me."

"Why like a church?" he asked, with some amusement.

"Because one of the best sermons I have ever heard preached has been preached to me here," she replied. "I have learned a lesson here. I shall never see these high ivied walls or touch a crimson carnation without thinking of you, Raoul, and all that you have said."

Then he watched her as she went from one bed of mignonette to another, looking eagerly for the choicest sprays, holding them up to him with wistful, eager face and sweet, pathetic eyes.

"Will this do, and this?" she asked, as simply as a child. "Oh, Raoul, I hope he will not be angry—

I hope he will be pleased! I shall tell you how I get on. I am nervous about it."

In another minute the beautiful face had disappeared, and Sir Raoul was left in the pleasaunce alone.

"A man might lay down his life for such a woman as that," he said, with what was almost a sigh.

* * * * *

Lord Caraven stood in the billiard-room at Ravensmere; he had been playing with one of his friends, who, having received a telegram, had gone to answer it. He stood alone, leaning carelessly against the open veranda, something more than his usual indifference darkening his face; he never liked interruption during a game.

"A most unpropitious moment," thought the young countess as she caught sight of him; but having given her word to Sir Raoul, she would have marched up to the mouth of a loaded cannon rather than have broken it.

Looking up, the earl could not but confess that he had seldom seen a lovelier picture than his young wife at that moment presented, with a flush on her face, and her hands filled with sprays of fragrant mignonette.

She would not reveal her hesitation but went straight to him, smiling so that he little guessed how her heart beat. He raised his eyebrows as she drew nearer to him. What was going to happen? Before he had time to speak his face was buried in a soft, dewy mass of fragrant mignonette.

"There!" said a laughing voice. "You said this

morning that this was your favorite flower. I have been looking for the most fragrant sprays of it that I could find."

He could not believe the evidence of his senses; it was incredible that the laughing voice belonged to his cold, proud wife—the girl who had swept imperiously from the room when he saw her last. He looked at her in amazement. She would not see the surprise on his face or make the least difference because of it.

"You have the very pick of the garden here," she said; "every spray has its own special beauty."

He roused himself and tried to recover from the wondering stupor that had overcome him.

"You really remembered, Hildred, what I said?" he began, with a pleased look.

"Yes, and I think you showed good taste," she replied. "I know no flower lovelier than fragrant mignonette."

"And you really think that I have good taste?" he said.

"Yes. Why should that surprise you?" she asked, with a smile.

His face flushed and his eyes drooped.

"I fancied," he said, hurriedly, "that you considered me altogether graceless and without one redeeming quality."

"Indeed I do not," she replied, earnestly, thinking of all that Sir Raoul had said in his favor. "That is a great mistake of yours."

"There is one thing," he confessed, in a low voice, "I have shown the worst side of my character to you."

She felt frightened and inclined to run away.

"You will not lose my flowers or throw them away?" she said. And then she was startled, for his handsome, indolent eyes were looking into hers with a new expression in their blue depths.

"Am I so wanting in chivalry and gallantry, Hildred?" he asked her. "I believe this is the first thing that you have ever given me of your own free will, is it not?"

"No," she replied, quietly; "it is not."

"Ah, pardon me," he said, with a quick change of face and voice; "you gave me your fortune!"

There was hot rebellion for one moment—hot, bitter rebellion. Then she remembered Sir Raoul's words. It was for her husband's good. She trampled down the hot impulse of angry pride—she stilled the bitter anger and contempt. Her victory over herself was so great that she was even surprised at it. She laid her hand on his arm.

"Nay, Lord Caraven," she said gently, "you are quite wrong. I was not thinking of money. Gold is dross—I despise it—I could almost hate it for the mischief it makes. I was thinking of something very different from money—something that money could not buy."

He was looking at her with keen curiosity.

"Something that money could not buy," he repeated. "I declare that you puzzle me. I thought gold was omnipotent."

"I do not think so. I do not like it. Omnipotent? Why, Lord Caraven, all the wealth of the world could not buy happiness or love."

"No," he said, quietly, "it could not; yet, Hildred, money has done something for me."

"I do not intend to depreciate it," she remarked; "but it is not omnipotent; and there are many things in this world of far higher value than money."

"It is true," he said, thoughtfully.

She laughed again, and, if he had known her better, he would have detected tears in the sound of that laugh.

"We are positively agreeing, Lord Caraven," she said.

He was looking at her with intense curiosity in his face.

"Hildred, what have you given me that money could not buy?"

The dark eyes gleamed softly.

"I will not tell you, Lord Caraven," she answered.

"But I must know. You have excited my curiosity—you must gratify it. You have enumerated three things that money cannot buy—happiness, virtue, love. It was none of these. Then what could it be?"

"I must go, Lord Caraven," she said, her face growing hot and her heart beating quickly. "If you weigh every word that I say, I shall have to be very careful."

"Hildred, tell me what you mean?" he requested. "What have you given me?"

"I will tell you," she replied, laughingly, "when you have counted all those tiny leaves on the mignonette."

She turned to go, but he put out his hand to detain her. She eluded him, and, with a light laugh, disappeared, leaving him by the veranda alone.

CHAPTER XXIX

"IT IS A LONG STRUGGLE, THIS BATTLE FOR A MAN'S
HEART"

"You look astonished at something," said Caraven's friend to him when he returned to resume their game at billiards.

"Yes," replied the earl—"I have been enjoying a novel sensation."

"What is that?" asked his friend.

"I am not quite sure," was the laughing reply. "I should not like to be too certain of it—but I believe that I have been flirting with my own wife."

The young countess had hastened smilingly away after presenting him with the sprays of mignonette. If that was the result of a few kind words, she said to herself that she would often say them. Sir Raoul saw her smiling and blushing, with a glad light in her eyes.

"Well," he said, "what success, Hildred?"

"The best in the world," she replied; and the pleasure was increased at dinner time when she saw that Lord Caraven wore some of the mignonette in his button-hole.

She tried to keep strict watch and guard over herself. When she found herself relapsing into her old

hauteur and proud silence, she roused herself. She who had always passed by her husband with lofty unconcern, who had never deigned to make the least reply to any remark of his, now studied little speeches that she could make to him; she asked his opinion; she smiled at his jests. People looked at each other in quiet wonder. Had they, after all, made any mistake about their host and hostess?

Lord Caraven was fond of music; he had a rich, ringing tenor voice, which, as a rule, he was too indolent to use. He would troll out a verse of a love ditty, or the chorus of a drinking song, in a fashion that made one long to hear the rest. In the evening Sir Raoul asked him to sing.

"It is too much trouble," said the handsome earl. "Why should I exert myself to sing when other people can do it so much better for me?"

"That is an idle excuse," returned Sir Raoul. "Lady Caraven, persuade your husband to sing—he has a voice almost as rich and clear as Mario's, but he will never use it."

She came over to him. He looked at his beautiful young wife in all the shimmer of satin and gleam of pearls; he gazed earnestly into the beautiful face.

"Do sing, Lord Caraven," she said. "You owe me something for my flowers this morning."

"Do you really wish me to sing, Hildred?" he asked.

"I do, indeed," she answered.

"Then you shall be obeyed. Will you have an old-fashioned English ballad, or a Scotch one? No French or Italian for me. I like good, hearty words."

He sang one of the prettiest of English songs—"Good-bye, sweetheart, good-bye"—sang it with such sweetness, such pathos, that his listeners were almost moved to tears.

"I could not leave thee, though I said,
'Good-bye, sweetheart, good-bye.'"

As the last words passed his lips, he caught a glimpse of his wife's face. What did it express? He stopped suddenly. Sir Raoul rallied him, begging him to finish.

"Let us have the last verse," said he; but the earl turned quickly to him.

"Not another word, Raoul," he answered; "I can sing no more. I have seen a ghost."

"A ghost?" cried Sir Raoul. "The ghost of what?"

"I am not quite sure," replied the earl; "but I think it was the ghost of what might have been."

And Sir Raoul said no more.

Guests and friends began to ask themselves could they be mistaken—could they have misunderstood? The cold, sullen gloom was leaving the young wife's face; the husband ceased his covert sneers and hard words; they, too, exchanged laughing jests and smiles. Yet Hildred saw, and saw plainly, that it was all her own doing. If ever by chance she for one moment forgot her *role*, he forgot his; if by any chance she relapsed into her cold, frozen manner, he changed as though by magic. She saw plainly enough now that all depended on herself.

She studied how to please him. For instance, there was nothing that pleased Lord Caraven more than

finding his newspaper cut and aired for him to read in the morning; he disliked having to cut it himself or to air it. She had always been loftily indifferent, thinking to herself that his indolence must not even be encouraged. Now she thought differently; the newspaper was cut and aired and laid ready for him.

Happening to come downstairs rather earlier than usual one morning, he found her engaged upon her self-imposed task. He looked at her with a bright, pleased smile.

"Hildred," he said, "is it to you that I am indebted every morning for my cut newspaper?"

"It is a great pleasure to get it ready for you," she replied, with a charming smile.

He was deeply touched by this simple act of attention. After all, there was something very amiable about the money-lender's daughter.

From that day Lord Caraven never opened his newspaper without a kindly thought of his wife.

It was perhaps but a small beginning, this changing of sneers into smiles, but it was something gained. Both husband and wife were alike in one respect—they had a keen sense of humor. The earl had more of this sense than his young wife, and it was a wonderful bond of union between them. There were times when there was no need of words, when a glance was sufficient, and Lord Caraven began to look into the beautiful dark eyes for the secret sympathy that no one else gave him. He began to do what he had never even thought of before—converse with her. If time hung heavily upon his hands, if he tired of bill-

iards, or there was no one at hand to play with him, it came to him with a sense of relief that he could go and chat with Hildred.

She grew accustomed to see him looking at her from the door of her room, with an air of apology on his handsome face. "May I come in for half an hour, Hildred?" he would ask; and then she would put away her books, or her easel, or whatever she was engaged upon, and devote herself to him. If he were told some merry story, her quick, laughing sympathy was the first thing he sought. If he heard any clever repartee or play upon words the first thing he thought of was to repeat it to Hildred.

All this was so much gained—yet it seemed to her very little. Sir Raoul asked her one morning how she was progressing. She turned her beautiful face to him, and it seemed to him there was a tired look upon it.

"I can hardly tell you, Raoul," she replied. "I have done my best, I have thought of him and studied him, and the utmost that I can say is that he has learned to associate me with all his amusements. That is not a very high or elevated state of things, is it?"

"I term it beginning at the very foundation, Hildred," he answered, looking at the wistful face. "If he commences by associating you with his amusements, he will end by making you share in all that interests him."

The dark eyes brightened.

"Do you think so? Then all my trouble has not been in vain?"

"I think," said Sir Raoul, "that you have made wonderful progress. All the coldness and constraint, the terrible distance between you that made everyone uncomfortable, has disappeared. Your husband's face brightens now when you enter a room; when you leave it, he watches you regretfully. You have gained much, Hildred. It is a long struggle, this battle for a man's heart, but you will win in the end."

"Still," she remarked, half wearily, "I am a long way from the grand purpose I had in view. There is nothing heroic in being able to make your husband laugh, in sympathizing with a comical story, in helping to amuse him so that the time may pass more quickly."

"Yes," opposed Sir Raoul, "there is something heroic in it. It is the first step. When you have thoroughly identified yourself with his amusements you can begin to influence Ulric for better things. Try to rouse him from his indolence, try to make him care less for amusements and take greater interest in his duties. Rouse his soul from its long sleep, and the awakening will soon follow. I am quite certain that his faults are rather those of training and education than nature."

It was easy to counsel all this, but how was it to be done? Perhaps if she began what he would call "preaching" to him, Ulric would grow angry, and then hot, angry, or bitter words might follow. Her undertaking would require infinite grace, infinite tact—and that, she said to herself, it should have.

The evening of that same day was a lovely one,

fine, warm, and brilliant; the sun seemed unwilling to set, the flowers unwilling to sleep. It was so warm and beautiful that the whole party of guests declared it was almost treason to remain indoors.

Hildred looked up with laughing eyes at her husband.

"You are going to sentimentalize among the flowers, Lord Caraven, I suppose. I hope you will choose a pleasant companion."

It was not in human nature—at least in man's nature—to resist the fire of those dark eyes.

"Will you accompany me?" he replied. "I shall be sure then of a nice companion."

"Is there anyone whom you would like better?" she asked, coquettishly.

"No—on my honor there is not," said the earl, hastily; "you are the most amusing companion I can find here."

"I am grateful for small favors," returned Hildred.

So they walked together through the long winding paths. He did not offer her his arm, nor did she seem to notice it. They laughed, talked, jested, but between them there was none of the familiarity which should be between husband and wife. Once her dress caught among the tangled branches of a rose-tree that had overgrown its limits, and the earl stooped down to remove it. His wife drew herself quickly away—so quickly that the jewels she wore seemed to quiver in the light. Her face flushed hotly.

"Thank you," she said, briefly.

The earl looked at her in comic surprise.

"What are you blushing for, Hildred? What is the matter? What have I done?"

"Nothing," she replied briefly; "these narrow paths are so very awkward."

"Then we will go into the broader ones. But, Hildred, pray do not waste all that lovely color in a blush for nothing; I know people who would give a small fortune for such a bloom."

"They are welcome to it," said the young countess.

"I do not say so. Upon my word it is a revelation. I did not think that in these degenerate days anyone could blush after that fashion."

She was half inclined to be angry; the remembrance of Sir Raoul's words alone checked her. She must be more patient, she told herself; yet more rigidly she must control her own nature, with its hot rebellions, its sudden risings of anger. The flush faded from her face—she turned to him with a smile.

"I ought to be gratified that you value my blushes so highly," she said; and she saw that he was pleased.

More than one strange thought came to her as she walked by his side. How strange it was, this law of Providence and of nature, that men should be superior, that women must watch their faces, humor their tempers, pave the way, as it were, for them through life, yet always be accounted as inferior. Why was it, she wondered, that the faults of men—even of boys—were generally excused on account of their sex? "Men will be men, boys will be boys," seemed to be a universal argument. Why should she walk by this man's side, studying his humors and fancies, watching his

face to see that it did not cloud over, using her bright wit and brilliant fancy to amuse him? Only because she was a woman. She was his wife; therefore she had to win him.

"What are you thinking about so intently, Hildred?" asked Lord Caraven.

She looked up at him brightly.

"I will tell you. I was thinking about you. You have a keen eye for all natural beauties, Lord Caraven—a mind that, if it were not obscured by indolence, would be artistic."

He glanced at her again, something of amusement struggling with his impatience.

"Obscured by indolence, Hildred? That is a strong expression."

"It is strong, but it is true. See how you admire this sunset scene; there is not one of its beautiful details which escapes you—the color of the skies, the hue of the flowers, the glimmering sunlight as it falls over the trees. I will tell you of a sight more beautiful still—that is sunrise. Why do you never see that?"

"See the sun rise," he cried. "I have not even thought of such a thing for years."

"Suppose you do so now?" she suggested. "I always think the fairest, freshest, sweetest hours of the day are the early morning hours; you who seldom rise until noon can hardly imagine what they are like."

He looked half doubtfully at her, as though wondering whether she was attempting to lecture him; but she met his look with clear, laughing eyes.

"I challenge you," she said, "to rise every morning this week—not to see the day dawn, but to enjoy the first freshness of the lovely morning air."

"I accept the challenge," he replied; "you shall see that I am capable of making an effort when I choose."

She thought that was enough for once, and she waited with some curiosity to see the results of her endeavor. He was down the next morning when she took her seat at the breakfast-table, looking better than she had seen him look for some time.

"I have made an effort," he said.

"Did it cost you much?" asked the young countess.

"I felt as though night were turned into day, or something of that kind. Seriously, Hildred, I thank you for calling my attention to the fact that I waste hours every morning in perfect idleness. I mean to cure myself of the habit; such waste shall not occur again."

It was another victory, but a small one. Yet, as she said to herself, all these, small as they were, would gradually amount to one worth winning in time.

CHAPTER XXX

"LORD CARAVEN WAS ROUSED AT LAST"

An old man with hair as white as snow, a worn, troubled face, and hands that trembled as they rested on his stick, was standing before Lady Caraven, bowing as though she were the arbitress of his destiny. "I am Farmer Moore, my lady—Farmer Moore—and I want to speak to you."

Lady Caraven stood quite still. He was a man so old and venerable that his appearance alone commanded respect.

"Farmer Moore," she repeated, "and you want me? I am very pleased to see you. Will you come into the house?"

"No, my lady; I cannot enter your doors with my present trouble on me. Your husband is a young man, but he is driving my white head to the grave."

"My husband!" exclaimed Lady Caraven. "You must not speak ill of him."

"He must not act ill to me," he said; "an old man, my lady—so old that my grandsons say a good wish from me is a blessing, an evil wish a curse—an old, old man, my lady."

She saw how he trembled, and sweetest compassion filled her heart. What could he want from her, this old man?

"I have stood here, my lady," he said, "every day for ten long days, waiting to see you. They told me that you were young and bonny—that you had kind eyes and a kind heart. Your husband wants to drive me to death, my lady—will you save me?"

She thought he must be raving, but his manner was calm and collected. They were standing together just at the end of the coppice, and Lady Caraven pointed to one of the fallen trees.

"Sit down there, Farmer Moore," she said, "if you will not come into the house—and tell me what is wrong."

"I am an old man, my lady; I have lived many years, and I have never seen an injustice prosper yet. The earl is going to do an injustice to me and mine. You will keep him from it?"

"I will, if I can," she replied. "What is it?"

"The Moores have lived at Bromhill Farm, my lady, more years than I could count. I have heard it read how, centuries ago, when the Lords of Caraven went to war, the Moores followed them. They have always been tenants on the Ravensmere estates. The farm, my lady—Bromhill Farm—is to let on lease; when one lease expires, another is signed. My lady, when I was but a boy my father signed a lease for seventy years and the seventy years will be at an end next month. I have sons and grandsons waiting to succeed me, and the house is my home—I love it. My father lived and died there; my sons were born there. The old homestead is part of my life—of my soul, my lady; standing outside of it, I seem to have no life."

"I understand," she said, gently.

"There has never been any difficulty about the renewal of the leases, my lady. The Lords of Caraven knew how to value good tenants, and when a fresh lease was signed, the earl would say: 'Moore, you will take a glass of wine with me,' and the best wine in his lordship's cellar would be put before him. There might have been tenants who would have offered more money, but the Lords of Ravensmere would have laughed at that. We were their humble friends and true servitors, my lady. You do not meet with such every day."

"I understand," she repeated, not knowing what to say.

"Now, my lady, the seventy-years lease, signed when I was a curly-headed boy playing at my father's knee, has expired. We thought, my son John and I, that we had nothing to do except call on the earl and renew it. We never dreamed of anything else, my son John and I. So we called, my lady, and a footman brought us word that his lordship left all the business connected with the estate to Mr. Blantyre. As we were leaving home, I said to my son John, 'John, we shall taste the earl's famous wine to-day,' and he, in his cheery way, said, 'It will do you good, father.' But there was no wine, my lady—no kindly greeting from the lord of the castle, no message to the old retainers of the house, except that we were to go to Blantyre. My lady," said the old man, solemnly, as he struck his stick upon the ground, "I hate Blantyre!"

She could have added, "So do I," but it was wiser to be silent.

"We went to Blantyre, my son John and I. He told us that he would not renew the lease. At first we thought that he was mad; it seemed to us that the very stones by the wayside must rise up and cry out against it. He said that we must leave Bromhill. My son John looked at him, and answered:

"'The Moores have always lived at Bromhill, and always will.'

"'We shall see about that,' said Blantyre. 'I have a more eligible tenant in view, and you will be compelled to leave, whether you like it or not.'

"This to a Moore of Bromhill, my lady! I think we were too stunned to speak. We went out of his office, and it seemed to me that the earth and sky were meeting. Then we heard afterward that Peter Harrogate had bribed the agent with a fifty-pound note to persuade Lord Caraven to refuse us the lease. My lady, it is a crying injustice. We are sons of the soil; we have made the farm what it is. If the earl sends us from it he will send me to my grave. I should die on the threshold; I could not live one day away from my house. He must not do it, Lady Caraven. The bonds of long generations must not be so easily broken. He cannot send his old retainers away in that fashion—men whose fathers died in the service of his ancestors—men whose bodies have been interposed to meet the blows intended for the Lords of Caraven. What is fifty pounds compared to that?"

"No," replied Lady Caraven, gravely; "it must not be."

"They told me," the old man continued, "that the young earl is careless, and that he leaves everything to Blantyre. You will plead for me, my lady; you will remember that an old, white-haired man has left his life in your hands—for I should die if I left my home for one day. Ask for justice for me, and if the agent must be bribed, I will give him twice fifty pounds; ask for justice for me as you hope for mercy."

All pale and trembling, she rose from her seat, frightened at the responsibility that he had placed upon her, remembering how her last petition for merciful consideration had been received.

"You may leave your cause in my hands," she said. "I think I may promise that you shall have justice."

He raised his trembling hands and blessed her, and Lady Caraven went indoors with a weight at her heart. Not least did she feel her great anger against Blantyre, this man who influenced her husband for evil, who advised him and counseled him in wrongdoing, this man who committed all unkind and unjust acts in the name of the earl. Then, with her vivid imagination, she was not slow to picture the painful scenes in the farm at Bromhill. It seemed to her almost cruel that one man should have so much power over another. She remembered her last defeat, and shuddered when she thought what another would cost her.

She must set about her present undertaking differently; she must be more gracious, more winning; she must condescend to plead. She had the life of a white-haired old man, the happiness of a whole fam-

ily in her hands—there would be no room for self—she must be more patient. She remembered Longfellow's beautiful words:

"Bear a lily in thy hand—
Gates of brass cannot withstand
One touch of that magic wand."

She would lose no time in puzzling reflections, but do that which had been asked of her. She would go, "lily in hand," and refuse to leave her husband until her prayer was granted. She smiled to herself as she thought how diplomatic she was growing. On the last occasion that she had a favor to beg from him she had not thought of a fitting time. She was growing wiser.

"After luncheon to-day," she decided.

And that resolve to control her own impatience and study her husband's humors was one of the wisest resolves she had ever made in her life.

After luncheon there was generally an interval of quiet in the castle. Most of the ladies went to their own rooms; some of the gentlemen went to the billiard-room, some sought the library. As good fortune would have it, Lord Caraven went to the library alone. Hildred followed him.

"Are you going to write a letter?" she asked.

"Yes; unless you will be kind enough to write it for me," he replied. "It seems to me a sin to exert one's self on such a day as this;" and the handsome earl proceeded leisurely to seat himself in an easy chair, and watch his wife while she wrote for him.

Her promptitude pleased him; her desire to meet

his wishes gratified him. The letter she had written was just what he wanted. The young wife smiled to herself at the thought of how well she was progressing. She looked up at him with a smile, saying to herself that she must bring the whole artillery of her smiles and graces to bear upon him.

"Should you like a companion for a short time?" she said. "I like this old library in the afternoon; the sunshine slants on the wall. I often come here, and, looking around me, I meditate on the glories of the dead and gone Caravens. They were a noble race; no wonder that you are proud of them."

"I am proud of them," confessed the earl. "I am graceless enough, but I love the honor of my house."

"And no wonder. I was looking, the other day, at some portraits in the Eastern Gallery. They were noble men, those ancestors of yours; some of them have kingly faces. Ah, they may talk of worth and money, but I would rather have the proud distinction of a noble birth like yours than all the money in the world!"

"Would you?" he asked, dreamily. "That seems strange."

"I do not think so. We all value most highly that which we have not," she replied, simply. "It must be an incentive to a noble and glorious life to have such ancestors as yours."

An expression of deeper earnestness than she had yet seen came over his face.

"I am an unworthy successor to the honor of the Caravens," he said. "I thought it would all be different when I began life."

"And why was it not different?" asked the young wife.

"I cannot tell," he replied. "I think indolence has been my ruin. I have never yet taken a real interest in anything."

"That is strange," said Hildred, "but it does not follow that you never will."

The window at which they were sitting was open, and long tendrils of white jasmine blew in. Sometimes they touched the earl's face, and it was under the pretext of removing them, lest they should tease him, that his young wife drew nearer to him. It might have touched any man's heart to see how she watched his face, how she kept her eyes fixed upon it, lest, by word or deed, she should irritate him. She drew back the long sprays of jasmine.

The view from the window was a beautiful one, extending over the pleasure grounds and the green, undulating woods. The wind that came in so gently was laden with the breath of flowers. Hildred looked at her husband, and then, half kneeling, she took up her station by the side of his chair. What it cost her to make that advance no one but herself knew. Her face flushed, her heart beat. It seemed to her a bold step. If Lord Caraven felt any surprise he was careful not to show it.

"Your ancestors were such noble men," she said. "I had no ancestors, yet I would never do a mean action. Where do my instincts of nobility come from? And you, Lord Caraven—you call yourself an unworthy descendant of these great men. Why?"

"That is a troublesome question," he replied, with a smile; "and the answer would have but little interest for you."

"Everything that concerns you interests me," she rejoined, quickly. "Why should it not?"

"I have not been so kind to you, Hildred," he said, "that you should feel interested in me."

"Perhaps we have both made mistakes," she returned. "I think I can guess what you would say. You mean that you have done nothing great and glorious."

"It may be so," said the earl.

She looked up at him, with all her heart in her eyes.

"There is one thing to be said," she remarked. "You may not have done any great or brilliant deeds but you have never done a mean one."

"I hope not," he replied.

"Nor," she continued, quickly, "would you allow a mean or unjust deed to be done in your name—would you?"

"No," he answered, so decidedly that she was filled with great content.

She ventured on a further liberty, one that touched him. She laid her hand on his arm.

"I knew it," she said; "I was sure of it. I knew that you might seem indolent, that you might be unfairly influenced, that you might, perhaps, at times, be misled, but I felt quite sure that it was against your code of honor, against your wish and will, against your ideas of right."

"What is against them, Hildred?" he asked.

She was silent for a few minutes, and then she laid her hand more tenderly upon his.

"Thank you," she said, "for letting me speak to you. I was half afraid at first, but now you give me courage."

Her sweet humility disarmed him. If she had been proud, haughty, or petulant, there would have been little chance to plead her case. Her gentleness touched him. For the first time in his life he took her hands and clasped them in his own.

"Do not be afraid of speaking to me, Hildred," he said.

She had so much at stake that she trembled. He saw her beautiful face grow pale and her lips quiver.

"Hildred," he said, gently, "you pain me. What is it you would say? Speak to me without fear."

Then she took courage. She raised her eyes to his.

"I know of a great act of injustice that is being done in your name, Lord Caraven;" and, in her own forcible, eloquent language, she told him the whole story. He listened in silence.

"Do you assure me, Hildred," he said at last, "that this is true?"

"It is perfectly true," she replied.

"That Blantyre has taken that bribe, and has refused in my name to renew Moore's lease?"

"Yes, he has done that."

"Then," said the earl, with unusual decision, "his reign will be a short one. He told me that Moore was letting the land go to ruin—that the farm was not bringing in half what it could be made to bring—that— Well, I have not patience to repeat all he said. If this be true, he has deceived me—and, by

my earldom, I vow he shall not deceive me twice!"

She had hardly dared to hope for such ready answer—such hopeful response.

"Will you listen to me," she said, "while I tell you more?"

"Yes, I will listen," replied the earl, with a gloomy face.

She did not spare him. She told him how his estate was worse cared for and more mismanaged than any other in England—how the poor cried out for help and did not receive it, the sick and the sorrowful for relief and did not get it—how the wretched homes caused fever and rheumatism and a host of miseries—how the laborers on his estate were worse paid, worse lodged, and worse fed than on any other—how the tenants were more heavily burdened—how his name was spoken with curses, not blessings.

He listened without reply, but she saw that his face had grown very pale and that his lips trembled. She spoke with passionate earnestness; there should be no mistake about the matter—he must thoroughly understand.

"All this," he said; "while I have been sleeping here! Hildred, I will see for myself what is the truth. I will trust to no one's opinion—I will go over to Bromhill. Will you ride over with me?"

She looked at the broad, golden beams of the sun.

"It is so warm," she said, "you will not care to go out."

"Warm!" he repeated, almost wrathfully. "What matters a little heat when so much is at stake?"

Then he looked quickly at her.

"If it is too warm for you," he said, "I will go alone."

She sprang to her feet with a glad light in her eyes.

"No, she replied, "it is never too warm for me. I love the sun. Let me go with you, Lord Caraven."

"Will you ride or drive?" he asked.

"I will ride," she replied, having heard him say that morning that he would rather ride ten miles than drive one.

He looked pleased.

"I will see for myself," he repeated. "Do they think that I am so blind as to be hoodwinked with false stories?"

"No, but they have believed you too indolent even to care whether the stories were true or not," said Hildred.

There was some little surprise even among the servants at seeing the young earl and countess ride off alone. What did it mean? Were better times really coming?

Sir Raoul watched them start; and he said to himself, as he looked after them:

"The greatest gift of heaven to men is surely the noble influence of a noble woman."

The earl would see for himself—and he did see. It seemed to him that he must have been asleep for years. Where were the smiles of welcome that years ago used to greet him? Now laborers passed him with sullen faces, with a touch of the cap and a muttered curse. He saw the wretched tenements where disease reigned triumphant—he saw mothers whose

children had died for want of nourishing food—he saw strong men whose just condemnation of him was written in their averted eyes and closed lips. He saw that for him there was no affection, little respect; yet he was lord of the soil—in some fashion master of the destinies of these people.

He rode in silence—silence that his young wife did not care to break, for she saw that he was aroused at last. They went to Bromhill, and there the earl saw matters for himself. There was little need for words to tell him how the prestige of the old name had sunk. Those honest yeomen, the Moores, whose forefathers had served his ancestors so gallantly and well, had no smiles, no welcome for him; they were sturdily respectful; they said little—the old man who had pleaded so passionately to Hildred, least of all. But the young, indolent, pleasure-loving earl shrunk before the calm, stern faces; he knew that he was in the wrong.

Nevertheless, if they were stern and cold in their reception of the earl, they had a warm welcome for his beautiful young wife. She had not ignored centuries of service; she had not broken the bonds between master and servant; she had not left the best interests of their lives to Blantyre. They crowded round her—even the little children came to give her the flowers they had gathered, and to look at the pleasant, shining face. There was a court of inquiry held within the old farm walls; the earl listened attentively to the old man and his sons, then he looked gravely at them.

"You have done well to speak out boldly," he said. "I could as soon imagine Ravensmere without a Caraven as Bromhill without a Moore. You need not go to Blantyre again. I will sign the lease—and it shall be done at once."

He spoke only once on his way home, and then it was to say to his wife:

"I have done justice there, and if I can I will do justice whenever it is needed."

And as they rode on through the sunlight, she told him heaven would bless him for it.

CHAPTER XXXI

"IN THE MONEY-LENDER'S DAUGHTER HE HAD FOUND A NOBLE, HIGH-SOULED, GLORIOUS WOMAN"

Lady Caraven was pleased as she dressed for dinner. She recalled the happy faces, the grateful words that she had seen and heard but a few hours before at Bromhill; it was worth living for, this power of doing good. She had seen something in her husband's face that day which had surprised her—something that drove away the indolent, easy expression. Was the sleeping lion roused at last? Had her passionate words, her keen indignation moved him? Had he grown ashamed of his indolence? Had he tired of his pleasures?

Sitting opposite to him at the dinner-table she looked at him attentively. Certainly there was a change in his face. It was brighter, keener, more on the alert; the eyes were full of light. He seemed interested in what was going on. Once during dinner she met Sir Raoul's glance, and it was full of pleased surprise.

"Now is my time," thought Hildred; "now I may secure what I want."

When the gentlemen came into the drawing-room she made herself most fascinating and charming. She sang, she talked; the whole party thought her exceed-

ingly entertaining. It was when her husband was looking most pleased, and listening to her with real interest, that she went up to him.

"I have a little favor to ask of you," she said. "Will you give me five minutes of your time this evening?"

His look was one of pleased, bright expectation.

"Assuredly, Hildred—as long as you like. I am beginning to think that my interviews with you are welcome ones."

So when most of the visitors had gone to their respective rooms, the earl lingered. It was something novel to him, this appointment with his own wife—something piquant. He waited for her in the drawing-room, where the blinds were still undrawn, and through the windows of which a lovely moon was shedding floods of silvery light.

He sat down thoughtfully, looking at the sky; he could hear the faint click of the billiard-balls; he knew that many a merry jest was passing in the smoking-room. But in some vague fashion—he could hardly understand why—he felt tired of all such pastime. His wife's earnest face rose up before him; again he seemed to hear her pleading, passionate words. Her own expression haunted him—"a wasted life."

Was his life indeed wasted? Young, handsome, talented, did he live in vain?

One little circumstance had touched him to the very core of his heart. He had said that he would see for himself the state of Bromhill Farm—whether it was really in the desolate condition Blantyre had

represented. He walked over the ground alone. Near a gate that led into a wheat field he saw two little girls, evidently grandchildren of the old farmer, sitting under a hedge.

"Who is that man?" asked the younger one.

The elder girl looked at him half shyly, but he affected not to see or hear them.

"Hush, Bessie," she said—"do not speak so loudly. That is the earl from the castle, who says that grandpa must leave the farm."

The younger one, with dire hatred in her face, stooped down and picked up a pebble.

"Shall I throw a stone at him?" she asked, and the elder sister, with a horrified expression, answered:

"No!"

It was but a slight circumstance, yet the earl had been deeply pained by it. He could just remember that when the late earl—his father—went among his tenants it was with the air of one making a royal progress; that he was followed by blessings; that the little ones laughed aloud as he threw handfuls of small silver among them. How different was his own case! A child had taken up a stone to fling it at him! The contrast was great, almost pitiful. Did he deserve such a reception? He could see the childish face dark with anger, the pink, dimpled hand grasping the stone. Something must be vitally wrong when even the children were ready to stone him.

He sighed uneasily. He had led a very pleasant life. Getting through a large fortune had been a pleasant occupation. He had enjoyed his gaming, his

betting, his racing, his indolence. But now something else was stirring within him. Could it be regret or remorse, or was it simply that he was tired and out of spirits?

Presently the door opened and his wife came in. She had removed the jewels from her hair and her breast. Her lovely face shone with a new light; her rich dress, her dark hair, made her a most attractive picture.

She went up to him.

"You are very kind to wait, Lord Caraven," she said. "I could not get away before. Lady Damers insisted on my going to her room to see a new-fashioned head-dress Worth has sent her. I could not get away. I am afraid you are tired."

"No," he replied; "I have been watching the moon, and thinking"—he did not tell her that his thoughts had been of the little child who wanted to stone him.

"I have come to ask a favor of you," said the young countess—"a favor on which the whole of my life depends. In granting it you will make me happy; if you refuse it I shall be miserable."

"That shall not happen if I can prevent it," he answered.

His wife continued: "I have never complained, because I saw no use in it; but I assure you that I have not been happy—far from it. Perhaps I am graver by nature than some women. I cannot fill my life with gayety, visiting, luxury, and pleasure. I want something more. Other women have love to live for—I have none."

She stopped suddenly, looking terribly confused.

"I understand," he said, quietly. "Go on, Hildred."

"My time hangs heavily on my hands. I have nothing to do—no occupation. Oh, Lord Caraven! be patient with me! I want to ask you for something that will give me interest—that will occupy me—that will stand to me in the place of happiness and love."

"I will help you to it, if I can," he replied.

She looked so fair, standing before him pleading her own cause. She drew a little nearer to him, as though her confidence in him were increasing.

"This is what I want you to do for me, Lord Caraven," she said. "I am not ignorant of such matters; you might sneer at me, and say my talent is hereditary, but you will not do that. I have some little experience, and I should improve day by day."

He looked at her half wondering, half amused.

"What is it, Hildred?" he asked. "I do not in the least understand."

"It is this. I want you to let me be your steward—I mean, let me have charge of your estate. I could do the duties far better than Mr. Blantyre."

"I give him a large salary," said Lord Caraven, half laughing; "he ought to do them well."

"But you have seen for yourself that he does not," she returned; "he is not a just steward."

"No," was the grave admission, "he is not just. It is that which grieves me. He has abused my trust. I shall never believe in him again."

"Then let me take his place," she cried, eagerly. "I do not mean in the mere keeping of accounts—you

will always want someone for that—nor even in the looking after little details; but let me be your head steward, Lord Caraven, and the welfare of your tenants and dependents, the well-being of your estate, the care of your property, shall be my one interest in life. I will be content to work early and late, to live without pleasure, if you will only grant my prayer."

"But you are a lady, Hildred. How could you find time for it?"

In her eagerness she forgot her reserve—she laid her hand upon his arm, and looked into his face.

"I am not a fine lady; I am a lawyer's daughter. It may even be that I inherit my father's liking for business. I shall find time, believe me, if you will give your consent."

"What would you do, Hildred, supposing I give my consent?" he asked.

"Say rather what I would not do. I would reform all abuses, I would make Ravensmere a model estate—people should point to it as a pattern. I would make your laborers men; they are now only soulless drudges. I would pull down those wretched cottages where squalor and disease run riot, and build in their places houses such as even the poor could love. I would educate the children. What a question it is you ask me! What would I not do?"

The earl rose from his chair; he bent his head with chivalrous grace before her.

"My wife," he said, "you shame me."

"No," she cried; "you must not say that to me."

"I repeat it—you shame me," he went on. "Yes,

I give my consent—my free, full, hearty consent. You will make a better mistress of Ravensmere than I do a master. You shall be the queen-regent; I will be your prime-minister. I place and leave all authority in your hands, and I promise you most faithfully that I will never interfere; you shall pull down and build up—you shall do just as you will—I will never interfere."

She was so overjoyed with his promises, with the change in his manner, with the earnestness on his face, that she forgot all about her restraint and indifference, and she kissed the hand that held her own. She saw her husband's face flush crimson, and she drew back suddenly.

"I beg your pardon," she said; "I am very sorry. I did not think of what I was doing, I was so overjoyed."

He took no notice of the involuntary caress, nor of the apology, though both had struck him.

"I am glad that you are pleased, Hildred," he said. "In placing my interests in your hands I feel I have done to-day the wisest action of my life. To-morrow we will send for Blantyre, and you shall confront him."

She left him then, pleased, happy, confused, with an overwhelming sense of the responsibilities that she had assumed, and with something, she could hardly tell what, stirring in her heart; while Lord Caraven looked in amazement at the hand she had kissed. He wondered if he should ever understand her, and he began dimly to perceive that in the money-lender's daughter

he had found a noble, high-souled, glorious woman.

Then he smiled to himself, thinking that in these strange days it was impossible to understand anything, and that it was within the bounds of possibility that Hildred inherited her father's talents for business.

"And an excellent thing it will be for me," he said, "if she has."

CHAPTER XXXII

"A ROGUE FROM LIKING"

The visitors at Ravensmere became dimly aware that some more important business than usual was on hand. The earl was seen with a preoccupied face. He had been heard to refuse Lord Damer's challenge to a billiard-match. He had distinctly stated that he should not join in the hunt that Colonel Hungerford had arranged. What was the matter? Lady Caraven was, as usual, bright, beautiful, and graceful; but those who knew her best saw that she was engrossed by some thought.

The earl rung for his footman.

"When Mr. Blantyre comes, show him into my study," he said; and then he went over to his wife. "You do not feel nervous at the task you have undertaken?" he questioned.

"No," she replied, calmly, "but I fancy that Mr. Blantyre will feel nervous before we have done with him."

The earl smiled. "If this trusted servant of his had deceived him, the sooner he was unmasked and punished the better.

"I think," said Lady Caraven, "it would be quite as well if we looked over that balance-sheet before Mr. Blantyre comes—it will shorten the interview."

He acquiesced at once, and followed his wife to the study. The aspect of that room was somewhat changed. The photographs, the love-tokens that had displeased Lady Caraven, the portraits of popular actresses and of well-known danseuses, had all disappeared; the room looked more like a study, for the tables were covered with books and papers.

If the young countess felt any surprise at its changed aspect, she did not evince it, though she felt the compliment. She proved herself a wise woman by saying little; if she had uttered but one word too much, she might have imperiled all her hardly-won influence.

Gravely, proudly, without a word, she went to the table, and took her seat. Her husband stood at some little distance from her. Silently she bent her head over the papers.

"You have seldom, I suppose, looked over one of these balance-sheets?" she said to the earl.

"No," he replied, "I do not remember that I have ever examined one."

"Then I will look over them," she said, quietly. Before long she added, "Will you look at this, Lord Caraven? All this is quite wrong—several entries are incorrect, and the reckoning is falsified."

The earl was slightly embarrassed.

"I do not think, to tell you the truth, Hildred, that I am very clever at accounts," he stammered.

"But surely you can see whether this is correct? Believe me, a child could see it."

"Then I am not so wise even as a child," he said, ruefully; but, leaning over her shoulder, he tried to understand what she said.

It was, indeed, easy enough—the whole sheet, as she pointed out, had been gotten up to meet the eye.

"And you have never noticed this?" said the young countess.

"No, indeed," he replied; "I have never even thought of it."

"Then you have been a very easy master to please," she remarked. "I need hardly say, Lord Caraven, that the man who falsifies his accounts is a rogue. You know it."

"I know that much. I am afraid to think whether all the balance-sheets he has prepared since he has been my agent have been like this."

"You have never looked into one, I imagine."

"No—never."

They were interrupted by the entrance of the agent himself—the man whom, from his face, Lady Caraven suspected from the first of being dishonest.

John Blantyre was a tall, gentlemanly-looking man of specious manner and good address. A rogue from liking, as much as anything else, he would not have cared to be honest if he could. He had contrived to ingratiate himself into the favor of Lord Caraven, from the conviction that he could do as he liked with the easy, indolent, pleasure-loving nobleman. He had done so. He had pandered to all the young earl's weaknesses; to the cry of "Money, money," he had responded by wringing more and more from the tenants, by raising rents, refusing repairs, by all the mean and underhand tricks that he could play. He answered the earl's purpose well, because he could, from some

source or other, always find him money. The young nobleman was too careless, too indolent to stop to think that while he was thus impoverishing the estate the unjust steward was enriching himself. Balance-sheets were brought to him that he never even glanced at; banker's books, bills, receipts, were passed over in similar fashion. He never troubled to look at any of them. The result was irretrievable confusion. John Blantyre had laid aside a fair fortune for himself.

"Let the worst come," he said to himself, "if I am caught there will be only a few years' imprisonment; then I can go abroad and enjoy my savings."

Yet he relied implicitly upon his good fortune that he should not be caught.

He entered the room smiling, with his usual bland, obsequious manner. His face changed when he saw the Countess of Caraven looking over his balance-sheets. The earl pointed to a chair; the detected thief sat down.

The young countess' eyes were raised to the bland face of the agent; they seemed to burn him. The earl left the discussion to her, as he had said he would. Words could not have expressed the proud, cold contempt of her face as she spoke to him:

"You are well aware, Mr. Blantyre, that this balance-sheet is worth nothing? The accounts are all falsified."

"I am not aware of anything of the kind, your ladyship. There may be a few mistakes—it was hurriedly made out. May I ask permission to—"

"You may ask nothing, sir," she replied, curtly. "Tell Lord Caraven if it be correct that you have taken a bribe from someone who wants Bromhill Farm—a bribe to turn out the old tenants and bring in a new one."

"Lord Caraven knows that he—"

But the countess interrupted him:

"Did you take the bribe? 'Yes,' or 'No?'"

"Yes," he replied, sullenly.

"Mr. Blantyre," said the young countess, "you are a detected thief. You have robbed your employer, you have falsified your accounts, you have ground down the poor, you have oppressed the helpless, you have made my husband's name hated and loathed, you have betrayed your trust, you have drawn down upon your own head the curses of those people whom ill-luck has brought you into contact with."

"Stay, my lady. You accuse me, and give me no chance to defend myself."

The earl was watching his wife intently. He saw the color rising in her face, he saw the light in her eyes, he heard the passion, the scorn of wrong-doing that trembled in her voice.

"She is equal to it," he thought; "there is no need for me to interfere."

"You cannot defend yourself," she replied. "I hold innumerable proofs of what I assert."

John Blantyre cowered before the bright indignation of the fearless eyes, and turning to the earl, said:

"My lord, I have been a faithful servant of yours; have you nothing to say for me?"

"Upon my word, Blantyre, I believe you have been a most consummate rogue," answered the earl. "I have placed all my authority in the hands of Lady Caraven. She is to do as she will."

The bland smile on the agent's face changed to an ugly sneer. The young countess rose from her seat, and, extending her arm, pointed with her finger to the door.

"I shall waste no words with you, sir," she said. "Go. We might prosecute you, we might force you to give up your ill-gotten gains, we might expose you to the contempt of the world—but you are not worth it. I bid you go, and the punishment of your conduct will be that everyone will know that you have been dismissed characterless. Not one word."

He made as though he would speak. She still kept her hand outstretched to the door; her eyes overmastered him. He turned to quit the room.

When he reached the door, rage overcame prudence. He looked back at the noble figure of the young wife.

"I thank you, Lady Caraven," he said. "I owe this to you."

She made no sign that she heard him.

"To you," he continued, with a sneer; "and we all know that you are here only on sufferance. Take care that your own turn does not come."

There was no answer. Not even a quiver of the white eyelids showed that she heard. His rage increased.

"Good day, Countess of Caraven," he said. "You

have called me a thief, you have, after a fashion, ruined me. I will be revenged—I swear it. Even should years pass before I can carry out my purpose, I will be revenged."

And with those words he quitted the study.

Lord Caraven made a hasty step across the room to punish John Blantyre's insolence, but his wife touched him gently.

"You would not surely," she said, "soil your hands with him?"

"I'll kill him if he insults you!" he exclaimed.

"He will not have the chance of insulting me again, Lord Caraven; now we will forget him. The unjust man shall pass away, and his place shall know him no more; we have finished with John Blantyre—now for happier times. If the poor people on the Ravensmere estates knew what has happened they would set the bells ringing for joy."

He watched her as she went with her free, graceful, proud step and flung the window wide open.

"We will have some fresh air," she said. "I can never bear the atmosphere in which a bad man has breathed."

"You would not be a good prison matron," he remarked, laughingly.

"No, I hate wickedness. I have a constitutional dislike to it; and I love goodness with all my heart."

"Then to win the love of your heart one must be good?" questioned the earl.

"Not only good but noble," she replied; and then their tete-a-tete was interrupted. Lord Damers wanted the earl.

Long after he had left the room she stood wondering if John Blantyre would keep his oath, and if he did, what manner of vengeance he would take. Not even a gleam of the terrible reality came to her.

CHAPTER XXXIII

"WE SHALL HAVE NO MORE PALE, STUNTED, DEFORMED
CHILDREN"

Before many days had elapsed it became apparent that a new reign had begun at Ravensmere. Sir Raoul was charmed and delighted; he never wearied of praising Lady Caraven and telling her what a noble work she was doing; he did his best to help her. A wonderful change was coming over the earl. Not that he was beginning even in the least to love his wife—that idea had not yet occurred to him; but he was beginning to treat her with great respect, to recognize the fact that she was a high-souled woman. It was of her mind he thought; her personal charms, great as they were, had not as yet impressed him. He had started with the conviction that his wife was a dark-eyed, unformed school-girl, and he had not as yet made the discovery that she was a beautiful woman; but her mind impressed him—her calm patience, her lofty standard of thought and action, her purity, her intense desire to do her duty, had all surprised and then pleased him. He wondered that he had been blind to these qualities for so long, but he consoled himself by thinking that they were only just developed and perhaps never—such was the observant power of the man—would have been developed but for the cir-

cumstances in which she was placed. He never dreamed of loving her—he had started with the idea that he did not love her and never should. He was a man slow to change his ideas.

But, although the idea of love had not occurred to him, their relations toward each other were fast changing. The beautiful, gifted wife was fast taking her place in every respect and in every way, except in her husband's heart. Her patience and good sense never failed her, little failures did not daunt her. Her courage seemed invincible; if she ever felt discouraged, she never showed it. Her influence over the earl increased every day; yet there were relapses into the old faults. There were mornings when, after having played cards half the night, he would sleep away the lovely, fresh, sunlighted hours, and come down at noon with just sufficient grace to feel ashamed of himself. Then it was that her calm, noble patience was shown to perfection. She did not reproach him as other women would have done, she did not utter little sarcasms and talk "at" him, as is the fashion with some of the best of wives; there was a high-mindedness about her that was irresistible. It was the same with his other evil habits. If the old fascination came over him, and he spent a day and a night at the billiard-table, to the utter neglect of all other duties, she was patience itself. She avoided that worst of all faults that even good wives have—lecturing. The earl knew that although he might fail, might break down in his resolutions, there was a kind, firm hand to help him to rise again. In some kind of fashion they were

like two friends; like husband and wife they certainly were not.

Lady Caraven lost no time when her husband had once given her permission to act. He affected to laugh and feel amused at her zeal and enthusiasm—in reality they shamed him. He asked her what her first reform was to be; and she told him all the laborers' cottages were to be pulled down, and fresh houses built for them—houses where the first laws of health could be regarded. She wanted good fresh air, dry walls, pure water, plenty of room. She did not rest until the workmen were busy in removing what she called the "fever acres."

She was to have it all her own way, yet she showed the sweetest submission to her husband. When the architect and builder waited upon her with plans for the model cottages, she took them at once to him. He looked up laughingly.

"You pay me a compliment, Hildred," he said; "but it is your affair entirely, not mine."

"I shall find no pleasure in it unless I have your approval," she replied. "I am your head steward, not your guide. Look over these with me,"

They sat down side by side, and Lord Caraven positively forgot all about the plans in his wonder at his wife. How bright her face grew as she dwelt upon the advantages of the pretty houses!

"We shall have no more pale, stunted, deformed children," she said. "Ah, Lord Caraven, you do not know how the sight of those children has touched my heart! Do you remember Mrs. Browning's pathetic lines—

"‘The children—oh, my brothers!’"

"No, I have never heard them," he replied.

"If you saw the dull, pale faces, the dim eyes, the deformed limbs! I always feel ready to cry out: ‘Give the children air, for heaven’s sake!’ Now in these our new houses they will have air; we shall see rosy faces, we shall hear the music of glad young voices, and as you pass by they will bless you, Lord Caraven—they will stand up together, the young and the old, to bless you. Oh, let us make haste!"

Looking at her, listening to her, he thought of the child with the darkening face. "Shall I throw a stone at him?" What a contrast between the picture she painted and the sad reality! Something like a sob rose to the lips of the earl. Stoned by a child! How the disgrace of it clung to him!

"You are thinking of something else," she said, suddenly coming to a close in the midst of her description of cottage gardens.

"I plead guilty," answered Lord Caraven. "I was thinking of you."

"Of me?" she exclaimed, with such sincerity of surprise that he was startled. "I did not know that you ever thought of me. You must not think of me now; I want all your attention for these plans. You must decide as to them."

"I cannot help thinking of you, Hildred. Tell me—from where do you get your wonderful energy, your fresh, bright interest in everything?"

"I cannot tell you," she replied, "I suppose all things are part of myself."

"Then you have a very wonderful self, Hildred, and I may be pardoned for thinking of it. Now about these plans—I think this is the simplest, the prettiest, and the best."

They discussed them in full detail and that conversation had something so interesting, so piquant in it, that the earl was deeply interested.

"Thank you," said Hildred, looking up with a charming smile—"I am grateful to you for relieving me in my perplexity."

"The pleasure has been all on my side," he answered, and that was the most gallant speech that the earl had yet made to his wife.

The difference in him was plainly to be seen. Men who had gamed and betted with him, who had won his money and paid him in flattery, shrank from him, seeing that their hour was over. They sneered about him, and said something to each other about petticoat government. But one day, when Lord Caraven had refused a heavy wager at billiards, someone remarked that Lady Caraven had taught him better ways. He looked up with a frank laugh.

"My wife?" he said. "Oh, no! She has had nothing to do with it," and he honestly believed what he said.

Her influence had been so wisely directed, so sparingly used that he could not trace it; and he thought that he alone had roused himself from his long trance of indolence. No woman on earth could have won a greater victory.

"I am so glad I have been patient," she said to her

self. "I am, had I chose the higher and nobler part instead of the weaker one of running away."

So time passed on, and the beautiful summer days were filled with schemes and plans for the benefit of others.

It seemed to the earl that he was really waking up from a long sleep. The world was wearing a different aspect for him. He had never given even a thought to politics. With the arbitrary insolence of youth he had pronounced them nonsense—and that was one of the things that Sir Raoul most deplored. Hildred, too, was sorry for it. She had been so successful in other matters that she ventured at last upon this. It was by a series of well-directed questions that she first aroused his attention. In trying to answer them he grew interested himself.

"If I could vote," Hildred had a fashion of saying, "I should try to urge that measure."

At last Lord Caraven awoke to the consciousness that in the government of Britain's mighty empire he, too, ought to have a voice.

They had seen nothing of John Blantyre since his abrupt dismissal. The earl had been told that he had left Mere Cottage, but that he was living at Court Raven. That piece of intelligence did not trouble him; the unjust steward was part and parcel of the past—a past he was beginning to think of with regret. Nevertheless, John Blantyre lived only for his revenge.

CHAPTER XXXIV

ONLY A FEW MONTHS AND SUCH A DIFFERENCE IN LORD
CARAVEN"

Autumn came with its golden wheat, its ripe fruit, its gorgeous beauty of coloring. The spirit of improvement was at work at Ravensmere; already the obnoxious cottages had disappeared, and in their places clean, healthy, well-drained dwelling-houses were springing up. Lady Caraven worked hard, allowing herself little rest, and the earl was filled with wonder at her systematic method.

"You ought to have been a man and a lawyer, Hildred," he said to her one day.

"I would rather be a woman and a countess," she replied, with a happy laugh.

The first thing that she had done was to make a list of every laborer and dependent on the estate, his name, condition, income, the number of his children, how they lived, and where they were educated, so that there was not one a stranger to her. The earl looked admiringly at it.

"Do you really mean to say, Hildred, that all these people are dependent on me—that more or less I have an interest in all of them?"

"I do mean it," replied his wife, earnestly, "and there seems to be something noble to me in the idea

that one man has it in his power to benefit so many others."

"That is from your side of the question," said the earl; but he thought more seriously than he spoke.

Already a perceptible change had come over Ravensmere. Fast-looking men who had rejoiced in the title of his lordship's friends had all left—men of note were beginning to seek his society. He had written several articles on social science and home politics that had been highly thought of—he who believed himself too indolent even to write a letter—but those articles and essays were rather the result of his wife's observation than his own. Women were, of course, very much inferior; but it was a great thing to have a clever wife. She would talk to him, suggest ideas, give her opinion; and then, when they had discussed the matter well, she would say to him:

"Those are excellent ideas of yours—why not put them into form?"

It was she who revised and corrected his papers—she, to whom, in fact, they really owed their existence, although the world praised him. His reputation was growing rapidly. Only a few months, and such a difference!

"Thank heaven that I have been patient!" the young countess often said to herself.

They worked together. She made their duties so pleasant to him that he would not for the world have renounced them. Husband and wife became, as the earl said, good companions, good friends. They had many interests now in common—the improvement of

the estate, the building of model cottages, the education of the young, the relief of the aged and distressed. With a thoughtful look in his blue eyes the earl would sometimes say to his wife:

"I cannot imagine why I thought all this so tiresome before, or what gives me so much pleasure to do it now."

No one was more gratified than Sir Raoul. He exulted in the fact that his predictions were fulfilled.

"I always thought a good woman's influence boundless," he said; "now I am sure of it."

But he was not misled; he saw exactly how things were—that the earl had started with the conviction that his wife was an unformed girl, and that, though believing her now to be a very clever woman, he still retained much of his early impression. Lord Caraven had accepted the fact that he did not love her with a lover's love, and that their marriage was a fatal mistake into which his own folly had led him—and he had not changed his opinion; he absolutely never thought of love with reference to her. They were good friends, with one common interest—that was all.

But with Hildred it was not quite the same thing. She had once loved him; and now, as his better nature appeared, she began to care for him again. Not that she ever betrayed such a feeling to him. She was kind, affectionate, patient; she devoted herself to his service; but no word indicating a warmer feeling than friendship ever escaped her lips. She did not even own to herself or know that she was beginning to love him. It was almost impossible to

help it. There was something very lovable about the careless, debonair man; his very faults had a kind of charm because he owned them so frankly; his handsome face would have been a passport to any woman's heart; moreover, he was so earnest in his endeavor to do better, so truly sorry for the ill-spent, miserable past, so anxious not to relapse into bad habits. She could not help loving him.

"I can imagine," she thought to herself, "how a mother feels who has taught her little child to walk."

She had a half-protecting fondness for him; she would fain have stood between him and every temptation of his life—have been his good angel; he was in some vague way to her a child whom she had taught and trained. Whether this affection would develop into the jealous love of a woman remained to be seen. She found herself always thinking of him, always trying to find out what would please him, always studying him; there was hardly a moment in the day in which her thoughts did not dwell on him. When he called her by name, her heart thrilled with pleasure; when he praised her, even ever so faintly, it seemed to her that earth held no higher joy; if he asked her to do anything, she knew no rest nor peace until it was done. There was no man in England whose comforts were better attended to; yet husband and wife were simply good friends—nothing more.

One day, after luncheon, when some visitors were staying with them, the conversation turned on a certain Lady Hamilton, who had just returned, a widow, from India.

"Lady Hamilton was one of your early loves, Ulric, was she not?" said Sir Raoul, laughingly.

"I suppose so," replied the earl, carelessly. "I had a great many early loves, if one may believe all the stories told. Do you know what my own opinion is?"

"No," answered Sir Raoul, "I do not."

"I do not believe that I have ever loved at all—that is, using the word 'love' in its best and highest sense."

"Then it is for want of appreciation," said Sir Raoul curtly.

Neither of them knew that Hildred had overheard the few chance words, but they pierced her heart as with a two-edged sword.

He had never loved anyone! She was his wife; he had never loved her, and she had been fancying that his manner had changed—that he was in some fashion growing fond of her. How wofully mistaken she was! Her face burned as she thought of those early loves of his. Who were they? How much had he cared for them? Had he whispered sweet words into willing ears? Had he, who had never once kissed her, kissed the fair faces of those early loves? Her heart beat fast as she thought of it. Then she called herself to account. Was she—an unloved, neglected wife—jealous of the flitting loves of an hour? She was startled when she found that the pretty ivory paper knife she had been holding in her hands was broken.

"What has come over me?" she asked herself.

He had never loved anyone. Would he live his life without love? And, if he loved anyone, would it be her?

"It is a terrible thing that we have done," she said to herself—"married without love. Ah, me! if ever a girl as young and ignorant as I was comes to me and asks the same question that I asked my father, I shall say to her, 'Marry without money, without position, without worldly prospects, if you will; but rather die than marry without love!'"

A kind of jealousy that she could not understand took possession of her. If, on looking at pictures or photographs, Lord Caraven praised one or thought it pretty, she would examine it in detail to find out, if possible, what he admired in it. If, in speaking of any lady friend or visitor, the earl expressed his admiration of her, a vague unrest would come over his wife; she would try to understand what attracted him. He had a frank, careless, easy way of expressing himself. Often, when she heard him, her face would suddenly grow pale even to her lips. If he loved at all, he must love her.

Lord Caraven discerned nothing of this, but Sir Raoul was more deeply versed in human nature, and he saw that the young countess was beginning to love her husband with passionate love. He did not know whether to be pleased or sorry—whether her love would ever be returned. Yet he could not feel surprised.

"He owes everything to her," thought Sir Raoul; "yet the last thought that would enter his mind would be to love her."

Sir Raoul also saw another thing, and that was that, despite her noble character, her great virtues,

her heroism, her patience, her devotion to one idea, she had one fault, and that was jealousy. Sir Raoul had noticed it in little things, and once he laughingly told her of it.

"You are jealous, Hildred," he said; "there is one weed among many beautiful flowers—you are jealous."

She stood quite still for a few minutes after he had spoken, and then she looked up at him thoughtfully.

"You are right," she said, frankly—"I believe I am jealous."

Sir Raoul was amused at her candor.

"It is true," he went on; "I have noticed it often. You will not allow anyone to feed your pet canary; and if those tame white doves of yours flutter round anyone else you do not like it."

There was no smile in the dark eyes raised to his—only an expression of perplexity and bewilderment.

"You are quite right," she said; "but I had not thought of it before—I have not been tried. I have had no especial temptation. No one has ever made me jealous, because, I suppose, no one has ever loved me very much; but I have capability in me."

"To be sure you have—all dark-eyed women with southern faces like yours have a touch of jealousy," remarked Sir Raoul. "How grave you look concerning it, Hildred."

"I am thinking gravely," she replied. "I am saying to myself that I hope and trust and pray I shall never have anything to be really jealous about. I feel—well I do not know how to express myself clearly, but I believe that I could be madly jealous, and then, if I were, I could do great wrong."

"I do not fear for you," said Sir Raoul. "You will never go very far wrong, Hildred."

There was a half-scared expression on her beautiful face.

"I do hope," she rejoined, "that I shall never be tried. Jealousy has done some strange things. It is as bitter as death, and as cruel as the grave. I may comfort myself, though," she added, with a bitter laugh; "there cannot be jealousy without love, and I have none to give and none ~~to~~ receive."

CHAPTER XXXV

"THE VERY QUEEN OF COQUETTES"

It was almost autumn, and people were saying to each other smilingly that summer seemed unwilling to go. The wheat was standing now in great golden sheaves, the fruit hung ripe upon the trees.

One morning a letter came to Ravensmere. It was from Lady Hamilton, to say that she was returning from Cowes, where she had been staying for some time, and would be glad to pay her promised visit.

Lord Caraven's first sensation on reading the coquettish little note was not one of unmitigated pleasure. They had been spending a very happy week alone, the earl, the countess, and Sir Raoul. They had been watching the builders' progress, watching the improvements; and the earl was more pleased than he would have cared to say at seeing once more a smile on the faces around him. He did not feel quite sure at first that he cared for the coming interruption. He gave the letter to Lady Caraven.

"If she comes," he said, "it is pretty certain we must invite a party to meet her."

The young countess looked up.

"We are a party," she told him; "we are three."

Lord Caraven laughed.

"Three is a very small number, Hildred. What would Lady Hamilton say if she came here and found that we had not invited one to meet her? Raoul and I would be exhausted by the amount of homage we should have to pay. Lady Hamilton is the very queen of coquettes."

"I do not like coquettes," said Lady Caraven, curtly.

"It would be wonderful if you did," laughed her husband. "Dark-haired and dark-eyed women, like you, Hildred, are generally severe; golden hair and blue eyes take naturally to flirtation. But that is no settlement of our difficulty. There is but one course open to us—to write and say that we shall be delighted. You will write, of course?"

"If you wish it," said Hildred, quietly.

"Then we will draw up a list of people to invite while she is here. We must have some eligible men."

"What does she want eligible men for?" asked Hildred, and the two gentlemen laughed at the question.

"Is she a widow?" continued the young countess.

"One of the youngest, prettiest, wealthiest widows in England," said the earl.

Lady Caraven felt a vague dawning of jealous dislike.

"I am almost sorry that she is coming now," put in Sir Raoul; "we are so very happy—all our quietness will be broken up and destroyed."

In his heart Lord Caraven almost re-echoed the wish.

"You forget the honor, Raoul," he said, gayly. "Lady Hamilton does not visit everywhere; nor does she accept all invitations. I know a German grand duchess and a Russian princess whom she refused."

"What is her rule in accepting invitations then?" asked Hildred.

"I think, as pleasure guides her in everything, she goes only where she thinks she shall enjoy herself," replied the earl.

"And what does she think she shall enjoy here?" asked the young wife, anxiously.

A gleam of mischievous humor came into the earl's face.

"Perhaps a rumor of Raoul's gallantry has reached her," he said, but Sir Raoul indignantly rejected the supposition.

Perhaps the Countess of Caraven had never undertaken a task more unpleasant to her than the writing of this letter, yet it had to be done with all the graceful courtesy imaginable. Then the earl made out a list of people whom he thought the brilliant young widow would like to meet.

"There," he said, "we have an eligible marquis, a court favorite, a millionaire, a philosopher, and a soldier. Surely between them her ladyship will receive homage enough."

His wife noted with infinite satisfaction that he had not mentioned himself. Evidently he had no idea of paying homage to her; but the words, "one of the youngest, prettiest widows in England," had made a disagreeable impression on her. She could not tell

why, but she had an unpleasant foreboding that evil would come from the widow's visit, evil both bitter and sore.

"There is another thing, Hildred," said Lord Caraven—"Lady Hamilton must have amusement. You will have to lay aside your work for a time and attend to it. We must have a ball—a grand ball, not a mere dancing party—we must have dinner parties and pic-nics, a regular round of entertainments."

'And my work must stand still," she interrogated regretfully.

"I am sorry for it, because I know that your heart is in it, but rank and position have duties that we cannot ignore. When a lady like Lady Hamilton volunteers a visit, it is necessary to receive her with all courtesy. You will be able to do something, but not much."

She sighed deeply, and her beautiful face became sad.

"I am sorry, dear," he said, kindly; "but it cannot be helped."

He wondered why her face brightened so suddenly, why she looked up with a sudden, glad light in her eyes. He had called her "dear" for the first time in his life, and he had done it quite unconsciously. The word that meant so much to her was less than nothing to him.

He wondered why she spoke in a tone through which sweetest music seemed to vibrate.

"I shall not mind it at all now," she said, with a warm flush on her face, and, having no key to her

meaning, the earl said to himself that women were indeed wonderful creatures.

He would have thought so had he known how happy that one word had made his young wife, how she gathered it into her heart and pondered it, how she brooded over it with silent happiness that could not be put into words; and he did not even know that he had used it. He would have said the same to a friend or a child; he would not have used it to his wife if he had thought of it or noticed what he was saying, for the simple reason that he considered any tender words between people who never could love each other nonsense.

With a light heart she sent out her invitations. Sir Raoul wondered when he heard her singing sweet snatches of song—wondered with a sense of gratification. She must be happier than she had been, or she would not be so light of heart.

The invitations were all accepted, and due preparations were made for receiving the beautiful Lady Hamilton. The handsomest suite of rooms in the castle was set aside for her; there was an air of expectation, of subdued excitement, that did not quite please the young mistress of Ravensmere. When the earl had, as he expressed it, time to think the matter over, he was pleased—his wife perceived it in many ways. He lingered with Sir Raoul, telling anecdotes of Lady Hamilton and of her powers of fascination; and then Hildred learned that they had been lovers when young. Why they never married, why their love came to nothing, she did not know. If anyone had

tried to explain the mystery of flirtation to her, she would not have understood it. That people could play at love for the mere pleasure of playing at it, that it was possible to simulate emotion for the mere sake of enjoying it, she did not understand. Life was full of reality to the earnest, high-souled woman who had accepted her fate with heroism worthy of herself.

"I must not be jealous of this beautiful Lady Hamilton," she thought—"but it is almost enough to make me."

The lovely widow was to arrive in time for dinner. That was one of Lady Hamilton's practices. She liked to be seen first in the full glory of her dinner-dress, in the full blaze of her beauty. She lived solely and entirely for her beauty, and for the homage it brought her. If she had been suddenly deprived of it, if any accident had robbed her of it, she would have been without a single occupation in life; she lived for it, she studied it. What would suit her, what became her, what attitude showed her figure to the greatest advantage, what pose was most favorable to the display of her graceful neck, what jewels looked best on the golden hair, what flowers harmonized best with the face that was like a flower—this was her only occupation. She worshiped herself, the perfection of her own face. It was no idly-assumed position; it was the profound study of her life. Never did naturalist spend more time over a flower than she did in the selection of a dress or a bonnet; she brought all the powers of her mind to bear upon it.

She liked to hear praise of her beauty. She was not in the least flattered when anyone called her clever or intelligent—no praise of her wit or power of repartee ever delighted her. She liked to read that the "beautiful Lady Hamilton" had been at such a ball—she liked to be told that she was the prettiest woman in London. Moreover, she was an insatiable coquette. As for really loving anyone, she had never done such a thing. Perhaps the nearest approach to love she had ever felt was the kindly feeling she had had for the handsome earl. She did not marry him because he did not have money enough.

She was a dear lover of luxury, this lovely Lady Hamilton. In all her gay life of twenty-three summers she had known nothing else. She wanted jewels to deck her loveliness, she wanted magnificent rooms, plenty of servants. She loved light and perfume, and flowers—she had all the tastes of a refined woman of the world. She liked good pictures, rich, picturesque dresses, and she chose from her lovers the one who could give the most of these things. That was Sir Gerald Hamilton. Certainly, the handsome earl was better looking; but, then, she had been told that he was in embarrassed circumstances. She married Sir Gerald, who was about thirty years older than herself. A magnificent appointment had been offered to him in India; he had accepted it, and Lady Hamilton, because she knew that she should reign supreme there, went with him. The climate did not suit Sir Gerald; he died, leaving her the whole of his fortune, and Lady Hamilton returned to England, more beau-

tiful, more charming, more coquettish than ever. It was said of her that no man could resist her, and that she never scrupled as to winning a heart or breaking it, if only to pass away the time.

CHAPTER XXXVI

"JEALOUSY IS AS BITTER AS DEATH"

It was the evening of the day on which Lady Hamilton was expected. Several of the guests invited had already arrived, and the Countess of Caraven anxiously expected her visitor. She had a strange kind of foreboding about her.

"I wonder," she said to Sir Raoul, "if some people do bring misfortune with them. I have an idea that Lady Hamilton will bring evil to me."

Sir Raoul laughed, and told her in his simple, chivalrous fashion that a beautiful woman could only bring sunshine and happiness; but the young countess sighed.

"Helen of Troy did not bring much sunshine," she said, "and she was beautiful enough."

"But," objected Sir Raoul, "there is a difference; Lady Hamilton has not her fatal loveliness. Times have altered; no woman's face, I think, will ever cause another thirty years' war."

The young countess resolved upon being armed at all points. Her maid felt that at length her mistress was doing justice to herself. She was that evening very difficult to please—no dress was pretty enough; she chose one at length of purple velvet, long, graceful, and made after a picturesque fashion that Hildred

particularly affected—cut square so as to show the beautiful neck and shoulders, with wide, hanging sleeves, fastened with a diamond knot on the shoulder—a dress that was the triumph of good taste; no ribbon, no flowers, no ornaments nor trimmings marred its grand simplicity. She wore nothing but diamonds with it—a small tiara that crowned the queenly head, a necklace round the white throat, a small cross on the white breast, and a bracelet on one of her beautifully-molded arms. Nothing could have been more magnificent, in better or simpler taste.

Sir Raoul looked delighted when he saw her.

"Lady Hamilton may be very fair," he thought, "but she will not look like Hildred."

The earl did not notice either her face or her dress; he admired her skill, her genius, but he was certainly not in love with his young wife.

It was with some little curiosity that the young countess went to meet her guest. Lady Hamilton had been shown into a pretty little boudoir, where she awaited her hostess, and these two women, who were so strangely to cross each other's lives, looked almost eagerly at each other.

Lady Caraven saw before her a tall, graceful, lovely blonde, whose sunny eyes and golden hair were bright and beautiful, whose red lips smiling showed teeth like pearls. After returning in the most musical voice the greeting of her hostess, she requested that she might be shown to her room.

She was in some measure just what Lady Caraven had expected to see. She appeared in the drawing-

room two minutes before the announcement of dinner was made, and then Hildred examined her more critically. Her entrance made a sensation among the gentlemen. Hildred stood watching the scene, watching the pretty maneuvers of the royally beautiful coquette, and how soon they took effect.

Examined critically there was no defect in the beauty of Lady Hamilton; she was a queen of blondes. Her hair had a golden sheen; it was soft, fine, and hung in waving abundance. It was such hair as rumor gives to Berengaria, of whose golden tresses a chain was made for a sanctuary lamp. Her complexion was as fair as the leaf of a lily, with the daintiest of bloom. It was as though one had taken a rose-leaf and laid it upon her cheeks. It was all nature, not art; art could not have produced the lovely clear pink that deepened into rose. Her eyes were large, blue, laughing eyes with sunshine in their depths, with long, black lashes that gave them a most peculiar effect, beautiful and fascinating. The loveliest feature in her face was her mouth; it was the mouth of a goddess, sweet and proud, sensitive, haughty, perfect in color and shape. Her dress was as beautiful as herself—satin of such pale blue that it was almost white, trimmed with a profusion of white lace. She had a few sprigs of heliotrope in her dress, of which flower she was fonder than any other. She was a beautiful, smiling, graceful woman, perfectly well-bred, perfectly elegant, perfectly lovely. When she smiled it was as though the very spirit of love had found a home in her pretty dimples.

Hildred sighed as she turned away. This was the kind of beauty that her husband loved—blonde, tall, and graceful. She was fascinated after a fashion. She herself was no coquette. If people found her charming and admired her that was their own affair. She cared to be charming only to her husband. She could not help watching Lady Hamilton, and wondering what was the spell that she cast over everyone. Every gentleman seemed desirous of talking to her; there was quite a rivalry between them as to which should win the brightest smiles; and she had a way—Hildred could not quite understand it—of making each person think that he in particular was the object of her special attention. How did she manage it? She had a look for one, a smile for another, a sigh for the third; one held her fan, another her flowers, and each flattered himself with the thought that he alone was the happy recipient of her special favor.

Hildred turned to look at the face of Sir Raoul. How did he, whose ideas of women were so lofty, like such conduct? She saw an amused smile on his lips. She looked at her husband; he had not joined Lady Hamilton's circle of admirers, and she felt all the happier on seeing that.

Later on in the evening Sir Raoul came to her.

"Hildred," he said, in a low voice, "how do you like our new acquisition?"

"She is just what I thought she would be," replied the young countess. "Raoul, hers is the kind of beauty that the earl loves."

He looked at the noble face.

"How do you know that?" he asked.

"I have heard him say so very often. Do you think he will admire her?"

"Yes," said Sir Raoul, frankly. "Everyone must admire her. She is like a picture by Greuze. But if you ask me is she worth any expenditure of jealousy, I answer just as frankly, No."

"I am not jealous," returned Hildred, quickly. "Why should you imagine such a thing?"

"I do not say that I imagine it, Hildred; I merely warn you against it," answered Sir Raoul.

"Of all people," cried Hildred, "those that are logical are the most difficult to talk with."

"Let us be thankful, then," said Sir Raoul, "that they are rare."

She looked up at him with a quiet smile.

"Raoul," she said, "there is one thing that I have remarked about Lady Hamilton."

"What is it?" he asked.

"She has been here nearly six hours; but I have not seen her talk to any of the ladies. When we went into the drawing-room she sought the most comfortable chair, and she leaned back in it with a smile at me. 'Traveling always fatigues me,' she said, as she closed those lovely blue eyes of hers; and do you know that she never opened them again until the gentlemen came in!"

"She did not want to waste her words and smiles on ladies," said Sir Raoul.

"I know I am very ignorant; but do you call that good breeding, Sir Raoul?"

"My dear Hildred, a woman may be very elegant, coquettish, and fascinating, without being quite what you call well bred."

"If I had my choice," said Hildred, "I would rather be well bred than beautiful."

The soldier looked at the noble, unconscious face.

"What would you say if I told you that you were both?" he asked.

She laughed a rich, musical, joyous laugh that caused Lady Hamilton to raise her blue eyes to see what was going on. She smiled sweetly, as though sympathizing with the happy laughter. Then she thought to herself that Sir Raoul was a very distinguished-looking man. Could it be possible that he was flirting with Lady Caraven?

There must be no encroaching on her privileges. No one must monopolize distinguished men like Sir Raoul when she was present. She must give the dark-eyed young countess a lesson, and the best way in which to achieve her end would be to monopolize the attention of the handsome earl.

* * * * *

"Jealousy is as bitter as death!" The words haunted Lady Caraven. Was she jealous? She could hardly tell. Her life seemed to pass in a fever of watching—to be filled with a brooding sense of something wrong, of something hanging over her, of foreboding, she knew not why. She only knew that the presence of the beautiful blonde Lady Hamilton was a source of vague torment to her.

She was always apprehensive—she could hardly tell of what. She was of too noble a disposition willfully to encourage suspicion of anyone, but she was ever thinking and surmising as to whether her husband admired Lady Hamilton or not. There were times when she roused herself, and said to herself that it was unworthy of her—that all jealousy and suspicion was miserable—that she would rise above it, and trample it under foot. Then she would find herself watching her husband's face to see how it lightened and brightened as he talked to Lady Hamilton.

She read a very sensible story one day—a story of married life—written to show how foolishly wrong and wicked it was of wives ever to be jealous—showing how, if a woman once gave her mind to it, she could turn almost every incident in her husband's life to her own torment—how she could be miserable over every word he spoke, every look, every glance; and Lady Caraven took the lesson to heart. She said to herself that suspicion and jealousy were miserable failings—that it was far nobler to give entire and perfect trust, to rise above ignoble suspicions, to despise wretched, paltry jealousies. She said to herself that she would take warning by the story she had read.

But her case was different from that of other wives. There was, perhaps, in all the wide world no parallel to it. Lord Caraven she had married without the least pretense of love, he detesting the marriage, yet forced into it, she honestly believing it was quite possible to live without love; then after marriage she had been as he was now—profoundly, coldly indifferent.

She at first had been inclined to love him—his handsome face and the prestige of his name had won her girlish fancy; then slowly, as her woman's soul and better nature awoke, she discovered his faults—faults that filled her with something like despair. Then came the turning-point of her life—the time when she felt sorely inclined to leave Ravensmere—the time when the noble advice of a noble man had saved her, had roused her to action, had influenced her so as to completely change her life, had elevated her, had given her an almost sublime idea of her duties and responsibilities. She had risen to the call; she had devoted herself to the welfare of her husband; she had used all her truest womanly tact, all her rare grace, all her intellect and talent, to rouse him from his evil habits, from his self-indulgence, from his neglect of every duty. She had succeeded even beyond her hopes; he was above the average now, whereas before he had been below it.

The consequence was that she loved him. After passing through every phase of feeling, after being filled with admiration that grew into dislike, indifference, contempt, she had found herself at last in love with him.

It was the consciousness of that which made her more sensitively jealous. He was her husband. She loved him, but he did not love her. She asked herself: "Will he ever love me?" And the answer that her own heart gave her was a very despairing one. She was not the style of woman that he admired. He liked blonde beauty; and here, under their very roof,

was a queen of blondes—a queen of coquettes. She would look sometimes at Lady Hamilton and think: "How he must wish that our marriage had been delayed! If Lady Hamilton had returned a little earlier, her money would have done just as well as mine, and he would have loved her."

It was a very natural thought, but one that made her exceedingly unhappy. To Lord Caraven himself the idea never occurred. He had his faults—they were not on the score of immorality or impropriety. He did not love the wife fate had given to him, but he respected her; and, in some fashion of his own, he respected the vague kind of tie that there was between them. At all events, he then had no idea of outraging her feelings or insulting her by falling in love with anyone else.

While the earl enjoyed the presence of his beautiful guest—enjoyed her coquetries, laughed and was amused at her flirtations, all in sheer idleness and good humor, his dark-eyed, beautiful wife was building up a theory of her own, and it was that her husband loved Lady Hamilton.

CHAPTER XXXVII

"THE TWO LADIES WERE RIVALS"

The grand ball in honor of Lady Hamilton was to be given at Ravensmere on the last day of September. The summer weather still lingered; flowers that should have died before were still living, birds that should long since have sought a sunnier clime were still singing. On the evening of the ball a bright moon was shining in a clear sky, and the wind was sweet as in summer. There had been royal entertainments at Ravensmere, but none had ever been on a grander or more magnificent scale than this ball. All that flowers, lights and superb decorations could effect was effected. There was tier after tier of brilliant bloom; the light of a thousand tapers made a brightness greater than that of day; tiny scented fountains rippled among the flowers. It was a magnificent spectacle; and of that magnificent *fete* there were two queens.

At the opening of the ball they stood for a few moments side by side; and then opinion varied as to which was the more beautiful. The Countess of Caraven was a woman of stately loveliness, Lady Hamilton of fairy-like beauty.

The countess, who had some vague idea that this night would be the turning-point in her destiny, had devoted much time and thought to her toilet. Her

dress was of some shining material that resembled cloth of gold; the rounded arms were bare to the shoulder, the white neck and throat rising like a stately flower from its calyx. The golden hue of the dress enhanced the beauty of the dark eyes and hair; there was a slight flush on the splendid face, a deeper light in the dark eyes. She wore a suite of superb rubies; they lay in the coils of dark hair, and sparkled like points of flame on the white breast; as she moved, the light scintillated and gleamed in the rich dress and jewels.

By her side stood her rival and perfect contrast—fair, blonde Lady Hamilton—in a dress of pure white—white, with green leaves and flowers—and with flowers in her golden hair—the perfect ideal of a fair, graceful, lovely woman.

As they stood for a few minutes side by side, all eyes were upon them.

The ball was a marvelous success. Lord Damers, who had come to Ravensmere purposely for it, said that he had never seen anything like it. He went up to the earl, who, looking very handsome in his evening dress, was watching the dancers.

"Do you know, Caraven," he asked, "who is the handsomest woman here?"

The earl looked round with a smile.

"Amid so many how can I decide?"

"The decision does not require a minute's hesitation," said Lord Damers. "Look round and you will see that there is no one to compare with your own wife. She is by far the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life."

The earl looked up wonderingly.

"Is she? Do you know that I have never thought much of her appearance?"

"Then you have been blind. Look at her now."

Lord Caraven looked up. He saw a tall, beautiful figure and a magnificent face with dark, proud, brilliant eyes and a lovely mouth, round which played a half grave, sweet, timorous smile. He seemed to be impressed.

"You are right," he said; "she is very beautiful."

"I should imagine so," returned Lord Damers, emphatically. "Why, by her side even the brilliant Lady Hamilton looks faded. Everyone is talking about your wife; you do not know how many men envy you."

Lord Caraven laughed aloud. Perhaps if the world knew all, he told himself, there would be little cause for envy.

"She is beautiful," he repeated to himself. He had suddenly awoke to the knowledge of the fact. He said to himself that he must have been blind. Had this woman been any other than his wife he would have thought her perfection. As he looked at her he wondered that he had ever boasted of his preference for blondes. What could compare with the splendor of those dark eyes, the exquisite coloring of that noble southern face? He must have been blind. He crossed the room to where the young countess stood talking to Lady Hamilton.

"Hildred," he said, simply, "will you save one dance for me?"

She looked at the pretty tablets, then smiled at him.

"I am not engaged for the next waltz," she said.

"Then give it to me," requested the earl; and the dark eyes were raised to his. "If I had been engaged I should have felt inclined to break my engagement," she said.

Lady Hamilton was not quite pleased. Two suns could not shine in one hemisphere, and if Lady Caraven had any idea of outshining her, the sooner that idea was abandoned the better.

"It is rather odd," she said, with one of her brightest smiles, "to see husband and wife waltz together—one would imagine you were still lovers."

Hildred was on the point of retorting that they had never yet been that but prudence restrained her.

"You will not forget your promise?" said the earl.

"For the waltz—no," she replied.

"Let me see you write my name," said the earl.

And Lady Caraven took up the pretty tablets again.

They held many names. Against the waltz she wrote: "My husband."

He was watching her intently, and when she had finished writing he took the tablets from her hand. How strange the words looked! There were noble names above them, noble names below them.

"My husband." He wondered why she had not written "Lord Caraven," or his initials. As he returned the tablets to her their eyes met in a long, lingering glance. Suddenly she turned from him with her face on fire, and Lord Caraven, with a strange sensation at his heart, began talking to Lady Hamilton.

"This is my waltz," said Lord Caraven, shortly afterward, as he came up to his wife.

She did not raise her eyes to his—she was afraid to do so. What if they should tell him her secret? What if he should read love for himself shining in their depths?

The earl half smiled, half sighed, at the piquant strangeness of the situation. This noble woman, to the knowledge of whose beauty he had suddenly awoke, was his own wife. They had spent much time together, both sung and worked together, yet he never remembered to have embraced her; now his arm was round the supple, graceful figure—the lovely face was close to his own. He saw before him the whole time, standing out clear and distinct from the others, the two words, "my husband."

Lord Damers had told him that he was a subject of envy. The past had all been a sorry mistake. How beautifully this neglected, unloved wife of his danced! It was the very poetry of motion. But—how strange it was—she never looked at him; she did not talk or laugh; she seemed rather to avoid him, as it were.

"She does not like me," thought the earl; "and she has no little reason." He was frank enough to own that. The dance ended, he led his wife to a seat, and then left her with a bow.

She was never quite the same again. As it needs but a small match to fire a train of gunpowder, so it needed but a little to awaken her love into keen, quick, passionate life. That one dance with him had done it. She loved him with her whole heart, and the sudden

ness with which that conviction flashed over her bewildered her. She sat quite still, the soft, sweet music, the ripple of the little fountain, the subdued murmur, all mingling in her ears—flowers, lights, jewels, fair faces, all dazzling her eyes—and she said to herself:—

"I love my husband."

The whole world seemed changed to her. Shyly, timidly, she looked at him. He was talking to a group of ladies, his handsome face all animation, his tall, well-built figure all grace. He was a man to be proud of—a man to love. But he must never know about this love of hers—this newly-found, precious treasure. He despised her for her want of noble birth; she must keep her love as secret as the grave.

That increased the distance between them. She was so fearful that he should discover her secret, so fearful that he should think her unwomanly, so afraid that he should imagine she wanted his love, that she took refuge in cold, shy, proud avoidance. There were no more rides or drives to see the buildings and the improvements; there was no more quiet letter-writing in the library. When Lord Caraven wanted Hildred she had some gentle, ready excuse, and with a house full of visitors it was difficult to determine whether those excuses were genuine or not. But from the night of the ball everything was altered between them; Hildred was no longer the devoted, unselfish wife who studied him and his interests above everything else; she was the proud, passionate, tender woman, who would rather have died than let him know that she loved him in spite of his neglect.

In consequence of this, the earl was thrown more and more into the society of Lady Hamilton. His wife declined to ride with him; Lady Hamilton assured him that she could live in the open air. His wife had no time to discuss his letters; Lady Hamilton assured him that there was nothing she liked better than overlooking another person's correspondence. His wife never asked him to sing; Lady Hamilton did so, and sat listening, and looking unutterable things. Lady Caraven's shyness was her opportunity. Not that she for a moment intended to make any mischief between husband and wife, or that she was in love with Lord Caraven; but she acted as she did simply because it was her practice to absorb the attention and engross the interest of every man who came within the sphere of her attractions. The deeper nature of the nobler woman did not recognize this. The young countess hid her love as she had hidden her jealousy; but it was hard to bear.

One trait more than any other convinced her that she was jealous of Lady Hamilton. She had until now been quite indifferent; all the world might know the terms on which she and her husband lived; she had not cared in the least. But now she grew morbidly anxious that this golden-haired beauty should never know them. She could not tell why, but she would fain have made Lady Hamilton believe that she was happy, that her husband loved her, that they were united and agreed as other husbands and wives. She tormented herself by wondering what Lady Hamilton would say if she knew the true state of the case; how

the sunny blue eyes would gleam with laughter, how the fair face would flash with scorn! Lady Caraven said to herself that she would suffer death rather than permit the story of her unhappy married life to be known to her rival. Whenever she saw her husband talking to Lady Hamilton she wondered if she herself were the topic of conversation. Instinctively the two ladies were rivals, they hardly knew why; instinctively one developed a dislike of the other.

There was no one to warn the beautiful young countess that she was yielding to a terrible fault that would bring with it a terrible punishment. Sir Raoul was not well; the old wound pained him terribly, and there were days together when he could not leave his room; so that Hildred was left to the pain of her love and sorrow.

Anything rather than that her husband should find out her secret. How he would laugh at her! The money-lender's daughter to love the earl—the neglected wife to give her heart, all unasked, all unsought for, to her husband! She felt that she could not survive the sneer. He should not know it. He might think her capricious; he should think her anything but infatuated with himself. He said to her one morning, laughingly:

"Hildred, the days of our pleasant meetings seem to be passed."

She made him some evasive answer and quitted the room. He looked thoughtfully after her. What had come over his wife? Had she grown tired of her devotion to him, or was it that her time was fully occupied

with visitors? It was not a matter of much moment to him; he did not spend much time in thinking about her; but her manner slightly puzzled him.

No one else saw anything strange in her. Sir Raoul, who would have read her thoughts like an open book, was not present. To the others Lady Caraven was simply a calm, well-bred, graceful hostess. No one guessed what a storm of anger and love, of jealousy and pain, warred under the calm exterior. The love would have been easy to bear if the jealousy had not been there to poison it.

There was no real cause for it. Lady Hamilton intended some day or other to make a grand *coup*—to marry one of the wealthiest and noblest of her admirers. She was not one of those who would consider the world well lost for love. As for falling in love with a married man, she would never have dreamed of such a thing—not merely because it was wrong, but from the simple fact that it was a waste of time. But the young countess did not think of these things. The fever increased in her veins—the fire in her heart. Her whole life became a dream of watching and pain.

He did not love her—he never would, she repeated over and over again. Could it be that he would love her fair-haired rival—the blonde beauty? If he did, what then? She was powerless to help herself. She said to herself:

"There is no hope now."

In her dreams it had occurred to her that she might win him in time. Now she felt that hope was ended. And the young Countess of Caraven—talented, clever,

gifted with some of life's greatest gifts—cried out that her pain and her sorrow were more than she could bear.

Why had she learned to love him? All had been well until then—his neglect had not pained her, his want of love had not tortured her. She had not cared in the least who knew her story or who did not. Now all that had gone. With the sweet, subtle love that had entered her soul—she hardly knew how—had come a whole host of evils and sorrows.

It was hard to go about her daily tasks—to smile, to talk, to look as though no sorrow engrossed her—but Hildred did it. Her husband found out, too, quite by accident, that she rose early every morning in order that she might go on with the work she had begun. Her letters, the plans, the wants of the tenants, were all attended to before the real household day began. He was pleased when he found it out; it was part of her noble character to be true to her purposes; but he never dreamed that love for him drove sleep from her eyes, as it had already driven peace from her heart—he would never have believed it.

So they went on through the bright autumn days, playing at cross-purposes, each believing simply and implicitly in the dislike of the other. With the days her love grew greater. There was indeed something most loving in the earl now. While she shunned and avoided him, she would have given the whole world for one kindly word, for one loving glance from him. She watched him with dim, passionate eyes.

At the sound of his footsteps her heart throbbed,

and her pulse quickened at the sound of his voice. Her whole heart went out to him. He was her husband, and she loved him with a wonderful love although she showed none of it.

With her keen, passionate love grew her jealousy. It was not in Lady Hamilton's nature to pass by the admiration of a man like the handsome earl. He must admire her. Had he not done so spontaneously, she would have won it from him. All homage was acceptable to her—his particularly so, because he was a handsome man, and because he had a beautiful, dark-eyed wife, who never looked quite comfortable when they were talking together—two little incentives which Lady Hamilton profited by, and which afforded amusement to her. What to her was nothing but sheer mischief, sheer love of admiration, was death almost to the proud young wife, who counted every smile that her husband gave to her.

She smiled sadly to herself one day, saying:

"Now I know the meaning of the words, 'I have gone mad—I love him—let me die.'"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

"MILDRED, WERE YOU JEALOUS OF LADY HAMILTON?"

With an intolerable sense of shame and disgrace, it suddenly occurred to Lady Caraven that her lot in life was quite different from other people's. It seemed to pass over her with a sudden, terrible commotion. She had been so occupied before with her efforts as regarded her husband, her plans of reform, her schemes for the benefit of others, that she had not given much thought to her own position as a wife whose husband made no pretense of loving her. The knowledge of her real status came to her now with a keen sense of intolerable pain, yet she would have borne its bitterness but for the fear lest the brilliant, beautiful blonde should become as wise as herself. That would have been intolerable.

What she suffered from the fear of her rival discovering her secret none but a sensitive, tender-hearted, neglected woman could understand; all the world might know rather than the blue-eyed coquette, who would smile and say to herself: "His wife is not beautiful enough to charm him." That would be intolerable to her. Whenever she saw her husband talking seriously to Lady Hamilton, she imagined that he was telling the story of his unhappy marriage. She watched him incessantly; if he went anywhere with Lady Ham-

ilton, she not only contrived to be of the party, but also to be near them. She watched their faces anxiously, to find out from the expression if it were of her they were speaking. Under the pain of this silent, brooding jealousy, the beautiful face grew pale, the dark eyes seemed to lose their light and brightness.

A trifling circumstance brought Hildred's jealousy to a climax. The earl was going out in a great hurry one morning, when he found that the button of his glove was hanging by a thread. Lady Hamilton, who was engaged on some kind of fancy work, with needle and silk in her hands, sat by. He went to her at once.

"Lady Hamilton, be kind to me—give this one stitch."

She laughingly complied; she would not let him remove the glove.

"You need not take that trouble," she said; "I can do it as it is."

With a pale face and darkening eyes the young countess watched the little scene. Why had he gone to her for this small service? Why should she hold her husband's hand, and look with laughing eyes into his face? She could not endure it. She went up to them.

"I thank you, Lady Hamilton," she said; "I will do that for Lord Caraven."

Lady Hamilton looked up in amazement, but there was something in the young countess' face which made her yield at once. She drew back coldly.

"Lord Caraven asked me to do it," she said.

"In all probability he had forgotten that I was here," she returned, in a high, clear voice.

The earl, like a prudent man, remained quite silent. He looked at his wife's face as she bent over the glove and he saw something there, that shrewd as he was, puzzled him. Why was she so pale? What was it that shone and gleamed in the dark eyes? Why did the proud lips tremble? What was in her face? He gazed in silent wonder. She had finished.

"That button will not come off again," she declared.

"I hope not," said Lady Hamilton, in a peculiar tone of voice; "and, if it does, do not ask me to help you again, Lord Caraven." He turned away with a laugh, but the mischief was done; the sight of her guest's golden head bending over her husband's hand had fanned the jealousy of the young wife into a flame—nor did what followed extinguish it.

The earl had laughed to himself, thinking the occurrence a pretty bit of by-play. He was smiling still when, an hour afterward, his wife met him.

"Hildred," he said, in a tone of gay banter, "were you jealous of Lady Hamilton?"

Then the idea seemed so absurd to him that he laughed aloud.

To his surprise she grew deadly pale; her lips quivered with emotion.

"Yes," she replied, bitterly, "I scorn to speak falsely—I was jealous of her. You may think what you like of me."

Still he would not be serious about it. He said, jestingly:

"I always thought until now that jealousy pre-supposed love.

"Did you?" questioned his wife, with proud indifference. "I always thought love pre-supposed perfect trust."

"You are a good fencer, Hildred," laughed her husband; and he thought no more of the matter. But she did. It had wanted but that trifling incident to fan her jealousy into a flame.

How the hours of that day passed she never knew. One picture filled her mind—that of Lady Hamilton's golden head bending over her husband's hand. She could not bear the thought of it. He might not love her, but he should not love anyone else. He should not laugh because she was jealous, he should not admire this fair woman while he so cruelly neglected her. She worked herself into a frenzy of jealous despair, yet was outwardly calm and proud as usual.

The dinner-party at the castle on that day was not a large one; many of the guests had left; Lord and Lady Damers had returned home. Sir Raoul was in his room. Lady Caraven had dressed herself with unusual care and attention. She wore a beautiful dress of amber satin and black lace which suited her dark brunette loveliness. She wore her favorite suite of rubies—rubies that had in them a light like deepest flame. A grandly beautiful woman she looked as she took her seat at the dinner-table.

During dinner she watched her husband and Lady Hamilton. More than once she saw them laughing and heard them talking merrily. Was it of her? Was the earl telling her that his wife was jealous? And was she laughing because the very cream of the jest was that her husband did not care for her?

Then she grew ashamed of herself. Such suspicions were unworthy of her. She tried to banish them, but they were too strong for her. Whenever the golden head stirred, whenever the sweet sound of musical laughter came to her, she fancied that she was the subject of the jest, until her jealous pain grew intolerable and she could bear it no longer. It was a relief to her when she could give the signal and the ladies could withdraw. She wanted to be alone to think.

For the convenience of one of the guests who was leaving they had dined a little earlier than usual. When the ladies reached the drawing-room, the room was filled with ruddy light from the sun setting in the western sky. It would be cruel, they said, to spend such a warm, lovely evening indoors. The gentlemen, thinking the same thing, had hurried from their wine, saying that it would be a pity to lose the last gleam of sunlight.

"Let us gather the roses while we may," sang Lord Caraven, in his rich, ringing tenor.

But before they went out someone prayed the earl to sing one song.

"I will sing a duet," he said, "if Lady Hamilton will help me."

It was useless, he thought, appealing to his wife. The last time he had asked her to sing with him she had refused.

Lady Hamilton was only too pleased. She went to the piano, and very soon the two beautiful voices seemed to fill the room—Lady Hamilton's clear and sweet, the earl's rich and musical—while the young

countess watched them with longing, pitiful eyes. They were singing about love, love that would never die, love that was immortal.

More than once the unhappy young wife saw the widow look at her husband; more than once there came to her a wild impulse, a longing to strike the fair face. When the song was over it was time to go and watch the sunset. Hildred saw that her husband did not leave Lady Hamilton's side. He remained near her, saying:

"We will watch the sun set over the lake. It is one of the prettiest sights of Ravensmere."

She did not hear Lady Hamilton's answer; it was given with smiling lips and laughing eyes. Was it her morbid fancy, or did she really hear her husband say, "Yes, and I will tell you the story of my marriage?"

She did not wait to ask herself if it were mere fancy. She believed that she had heard it, and the idea of it drove her almost mad. They were going to watch the sun fade among the flowers, and the earl would meanwhile entertain his companion with the story of his marriage—how he had to wed the money-lender's daughter, or else lose Ravensmere, but how he had avenged himself by neglecting her. Hildred's heart and brain were on fire. The husband she loved despite his neglect and the rival whom she had disliked were going to laugh over her together. An idea suddenly occurred to the unhappy wife—they should not do this, they should not laugh at her; her love and her jealousy should not be sport for them. She would follow them unperceived, and then, when they began to laugh

over her story, she would confront them, and dare them to amuse themselves with her anguish. All the pride of her nature was aroused. She would suffer death rather than be laughed at by her husband and her rival.

She was bewildered—not herself.

She had never been herself from the moment in which she recognized the fact that she loved her husband with all the strength and passion of her nature. She was bewildered by the pain of her love and the smart of her jealousy. The only idea quite clear to her mind was that her husband and his guest should not laugh at her.

When the idea of going out had first been mentioned, she had sent for a scarf, and it lay upon a couch now, a glittering mass of silvery gauze. She saw her husband take it up.

"Whose is this?" he asked; and no one answered. "It is very pretty," he added; "and, if it has no owner, you shall have it, Lady Hamilton."

The young countess did not step forward to claim it: she saw her husband throw it over the pearly shoulders and the white neck, and Lady Hamilton look up at him with a coquettish laugh.

"Evidently," she said, "you are quite ignorant of the fashion in which ladies now wear scarfs. Our great-grandmothers drew them tightly stretched across the shoulders—we like them in this fashion."

Raising her arm, she wound the silvery gauze round her head and neck and arms, shading the bright face, and making her look so piquantly beautiful that Lord Caraven cried out in admiration.

"That is capital," he said—"ladies always know what is picturesque."

The young countess saw them quit the room together. She resolved upon following them. She heard her husband say, laughingly, to his companion:

"We will go straight to the lake—I want you to watch the sunset there."

Lady Caraven delayed only a few moments—it was to go to her room for a large dark shawl that should hide her—hide the amber satin and rich black lace—hide her face and head, so that anyone meeting her should quite fail to recognize her. "Creeping along in the dark, who will know me? Or, if they know me, who will care for me?" she said to herself.

When she reached her room she found a message there from Sir Raoul, asking if she would go to his apartments for a short time. She said to herself "No;" with her heart and soul in a ferment, she could not talk to Sir Raoul. She had a dim idea that what she was about to do was wrong, undignified, ungenerous. She could not have persevered in her purpose had she looked but once in the calm, noble face of the man who wanted her to be a heroine.

"Tell Sir Raoul that I am engaged just at present, but that I will see him later on in the evening," she said.

She sent him some books and flowers—she did not go to him.

"Later on in the evening."

She had said the words quite thoughtlessly; they returned to her afterward with keen pain. She was

reckless as to what followed; as to whether her husband would be angry or not she was indifferent. The only thing was that she had resolved upon preventing her husband and her rival from jesting about her; that should never be.

She went round by the postern door, and in the distance she caught a glimpse of the white dress and the silver veil. It was a most peculiar night. At any other time she would have been lost in wonder and delight—now she took no heed. The earth seemed to be growing dark while the light lingered in the sky; masses of crimson clouds, edged with purple and gold, appeared to be making a bed for the sun to lie on; the roseate light seemed to linger; among the trees and flowers silence reigned unbroken; in the far distance the waters of the lake shone like crimson and gold. It was one of those nights when the darkness seems to come on in a few minutes—when it descends swiftly and suddenly, as though the sky were falling and covering the earth. There was such deep silence among the trees as she went gently along that it seemed to Hildred's excited fancy as though this were a mystical night holding strange secrets and strange meaning.

To think that her husband did not recognize that silver veil as hers! She had worn it ever since she had been at Ravensmere; there was not a servant about the place who would not have recognized it in a minute; whereas her husband did not even know to whom it belonged.

"That proves what little notice he has bestowed on me," she thought bitterly.

The grounds of Ravensmere were so well wooded that behind the safe shelter of the tall trees she could walk quite unseen by the earl and his companion. The sweet southern wind that scarcely stirred the leaves brought to her from time to time chance words, but none of them were of her. She did not want to listen to their conversation; she only wished to prevent the story of her marriage from being told. Sometimes the low, musical laughter of Lady Hamilton reached her, and then the rich ring of her husband's voice would sound cheerily in the gathering gloom; and all the time she, his wife, was slowly threading her way after him, like the shadow of fate.

There had not been one word of her yet—the conversation had all been about people they had known years before; and now they stood on the borders of the lake, where the crimson waters, to the dazed mind of the young countess, looked like blood. She shuddered as the idea occurred to her. Some of the crimson glow fell on the white dress and on the silken veil. She saw Lady Hamilton hold out her little white hand, and cry, gleefully:

“Look, Lord Caraven—my hand is dyed red!”

They had not spoken of her. The red sun was fast descending.

“This is what I wish you to see,” said the earl. “The moment in which the sun seems to touch the water, a red gleam passes through it, then the next moment it is quite dark.”

They watched in silence, while the dark figure stood motionless and still behind them. The sun, as it set,

seemed to touch the outer edge of the lake; a red gleam came over it, beautiful and curious, and then, almost at once, it was dark.

"We will go home by the coppice," said Lord Caraven; and his wife remembered that the long avenue of trees extended to the very gate. She could therefore walk almost side by side with them, yet quite unseen.

They had not mentioned her name. Could she have been wrong in her suspicion? Had she mistaken her husband's words?

They were standing at the edge of the lake—a cold dark sheet of water now—and she established herself behind a group of alder-trees. It seemed to her that the silver veil on the fair woman's head and shoulders absorbed all the light there was. Presently she drew near. Another group of trees separated her from the two who were so unconscious of her presence—large trees with swaying branches; through them the night-wind brought every word to her. They talked only of the light on the water, and the sudden darkness there—of someone who had known and loved Lady Hamilton before her marriage. She laughed coquettishly over it.

How long was that nonsense to last, the unhappy young wife asked herself. How long was she to stand under the darkening evening skies, with the great alder-branches swaying to and fro, the souging of the wind in her ears, the fire of love, the madness of jealousy raging in her heart—how long? It was almost unbearable. She felt inclined to cry out that it must

end. She clinched her fingers, she bit her lip; then suddenly she heard the sound of her name, her maiden name, "Hildred Ransome!" What were they saying? Was the earl telling how he had been compelled to encumber himself with a wife he did not love? Was he saying that, although he did not love her and they were strangers to each other, she cared for him? Was he laughing because she had owned that she was jealous of him?

"I cannot bear it!" she thought.

The next moment there was a scound of a shot—something seemed to rattle through the alder-branches—there was a low cry, a startled exclamation.

"There are poachers in the wood," she thought; "he will go in search of them, and then he will find me!"

She turned to fly; now that there was the danger of being caught she seemed to wake to a full consciousness of what she was doing; the bare fact that she was listening seemed to come to her as it had never done before. She turned to fly; not for anything that could be given would she be caught there. She wanted to hasten, but she could not; it was as though great weights of lead were fastened to her feet. Her brain was dizzy; the unusual excitement, the frenzy of love and jealousy, had been too much for her; her tall, graceful figure swayed for a minute like a leaf in the wind, a low moan came from her lips, and then, as in a dream, the white, angry face of her husband was looking into hers, and he had grasped her arm in a hard, cruel grasp.

CHAPTER XXXIX

"SPEAKING TO YOU ACROSS A GRAVE WHERE MY LOVE LIES
—SLAIN!"

Near the lake, across which the last red glimmer of the sunset had faded, husband and wife stood for one moment beneath the darkening sky, looking at each other. Lord Caraven's face was ghastly white, and unknown, untold horror lay in his eyes, his lips trembled with uncontrollable emotion; Hildred—pale, terrified, wondering—gazed at him like one fascinated.

"What is it?" she gasped.

"You guilty woman," cried the earl—"you cruel, guilty, jealous woman!"

She shrank back as though he had struck her—her lips parted as though she would speak, but all sound died away on them.

"You guilty woman," repeated the earl, "own the truth! You followed Lady Hamilton and me here to watch, to listen. Speak!"

"May heaven pardon me, I did!" she moaned.

"Here you must remain. I shall know where to find you, crouching at the end of the alder-trees, where you hid yourself to listen to your husband and his guest. Great heaven! that a spy should bear my name! Stay here until I return. If you attempt to escape I will send the whole county after you. And

I was beginning to care for you—to think you a noble woman!”

She shrank cowering from him. His angry face, the anger that shone in his eyes, the stern voice, frightened her. She shrank lower and lower, until she fell on her knees, sobbing as though her heart would break.

“Stir at your peril!” he said, and then he left her.

For some minutes afterward she heard sounds on the borders of the lake—murmured sounds, as of intense pity and compassion, followed by the tramp of many footsteps, and then all was still.

The ground was covered with dead and dying leaves. Lady Caraven flung herself down upon them, and as she lay there the old words came to her: “Let me die!” Death would have been mercy.

What did it all mean? She had forgotten all about the shot she believed the poachers to have fired in the woods—it had not dwelt for one moment in her mind. She was in a maze of doubt, difficulty and despair.

What did he mean? If she attempted to escape he would send the whole county after her. Surely she had not merited such threats. Surely she had not deserved language that he might have used toward a murderer, but which came strangely enough to his wife. He had discovered that she loved him, that she was jealous, that she had followed him for the sake of watching and listening to him; but surely that was not enough to call out the whole county to pursue her.

He had called her guilty. She had owned that she was. Ah! dear heaven, if she had but died when a

child in her mother's arms! He had called her cruel; that she was not, for she would never have voluntarily hurt even a worm. Why was she to remain there—to move at her peril? What did it mean?

The golden stars came out in the sky. Was it really herself, or was she dreaming? Was she Hildred, the beautiful, popular Countess of Caraven, lying there in all the abandonment of her misery, her husband's angry voice in her ears, the marks of his angry grasp on her arm? Outcast, wretched, despairing, there was only one friend for her in the world, and that was Sir Raoul; if she could but see him, if she could but tell him! The pitiless night hid her from all eyes. Surely there had never been a night so full of pain.

How long she had been lying there she never knew. Time was all ended for her. She was conscious only of infinite misery. She did not even feel the chill breath of the wind as it passed over her.

Then, after what seemed to her an age of suspense and agony, she heard footsteps amid the brushwood, and Lord Caraven calling her by name.

"I am here," she said.

In the thick growing darkness it was with difficulty that he discovered her. He saw her at length with her face hidden among the dead leaves.

"You may rise and thank heaven," he said, in a stern voice, "that you have not succeeded; the evil is not so great as it might have been."

She rose and stood before him, the same dazed look on her face.

"I do not understand—you say such hard, such cruel things," she moaned.

"Hard and cruel," repeated her husband, with bitter contempt; "did ever a woman live so cruel as you?"

"I am not cruel," she replied. "I have been driven mad."

There was such infinite sadness in the young voice, such dreary despair in the young face, that he was touched in spite of his anger and contempt.

"Tell me," he said, "what made you do this thing—this cruel, ungenerous, unwomanly deed?"

She thought he referred to her conduct in following him, and they seemed to her hard words.

"What made me do it? You will only despise and hate me the more if I tell you," she replied.

"Frankly speaking, Hildred, nothing that you can say to me will make the matter worse, but it may certainly be made better. Tell me the plain truth."

"Yes, I will tell you," she replied. "I see that all good understanding is at an end between us."

"That is quite certain," he said, with emphasis; "with my consent you shall never enter my doors again."

"Have I acted so very wrong?" she asked sadly.

"Wrong!" he exclaimed, contemptuously. "We will waive that, Hildred. You have done that which I can never pardon. Now tell me why you did it. You may speak the truth to me; you bear my name, I will shield you from all harm. No one knows but myself."

"Then she did not see me?" said Hildred, drearily.

"No—and you may be thankful for it," answered the earl, severely. "She did not see you. You may speak quite frankly—no one knows anything about it except myself. Now tell me."

"What have I to tell you?" she said. "I did it; I followed you here because—oh, how hard it is to tell!—because I was jealous of her. I thought that you both were ridiculing me, that you would tell her that you had been obliged to marry me to save yourself from ruin, but that you did not love me, you did not care for me, you disliked me, you hated me, you longed to be free from me—my accursed money was all you wanted—that you would never like me. And I fancied she would pity you, in that soft, caressing voice of hers—pity you for being burdened with a wife you did not love. I believed that you would tell her that I was jealous of her, that then both of you would laugh at me."

The passion of her words had deadened all sense of shame. She had forgotten that which her jealousy had prompted her to do, and remembered her great, bitter wrongs. She was no longer a heroine—only a passionate, injured, deeply-loving woman. She rose to the occasion.

The earl was impressed more than he would have cared to own.

"I could not bear it," she continued, passionately. "I should have done worse than this, I am sure, if it could have been done. I was mad. I will tell you all. I was mad, because I had learned to love you with all the strength of my heart and soul. I could not bear that you should jest about me with careless words; it was as though you had stabbed me for pleasure."

"You love me?" he interrogated, incredulously.

The dark shawl fell from her, and she stood erect before him in all the dignity of her pale, passionate beauty. Her amber dress and her rubies gleamed in the starlight; the queenly head was held aloft; she no longer pleaded and wept; the memory of her passionate love and her bitter wrongs filled her with angry pride.

"Yes, I love you," she continued, proudly. "Whose is the sin? Is it mine because I, your wife, have to tell you this, and you feel surprised? I love you; and now that I have to leave you, I tell you that woman never loved man, wife never loved husband more dearly, more deeply, more devotedly, than I love you. I would have devoted my life to you; I would have died for you; every beat of my heart, every thought of my mind, every action was for you. I love you as Elaine loved the knight of old when she said:

"'I have gone mad—I love you—let me die!'"

She drew nearer to him.

"I love you as no one else ever will—as no woman has ever loved you; partly because I could not help loving you and partly because I have helped to awaken the better nature within you. You may live many years, happy, flattered, but no love like mine will ever reach you; the wife you are sending from you is the dearest and truest friend you have."

He looked terribly distressed.

"Why did you not tell me this before, Hildred?" he asked.

"I tell you? How little you know me! Was it my

place to go to the husband who neglected me and plead for his caresses—for his love? I would have died a thousand deaths first. How little you know me! I should not tell you all this now, but that I know in this world we shall never perhaps meet again. I am speaking to you across a grave. I stretch out my hands to you over a grave—the grave where my love lies—slain!"

And as she said the words she fell upon her knees, weeping, sobbing with bitter cries, as though a grave lay there, and she had fallen upon it.

He was touched. He could not tolerate what he believed to be her crime, but she was young, beautiful, and loving. Her crime had been committed through love for him. He raised her from the ground.

"I am very sorry, Hildred," he said; "it is very sad for both of us. Now we must talk of something else. You must go at once."

She raised her weeping eyes to him.

"Must you send me away?" she asked, gently. "It was wrong, I was mad with jealous anger, but I did not think I was. Could you overlook it?"

"You speak lightly," he replied, sternly. "No, you can never re-enter my house. I have arranged it all. I did so when I took poor Lady Hamilton back to the castle. I told our guests that you had been suddenly sent for by your father, that I had driven you to the station—and it is to your father's house that you must go."

"Very well," she said, drearily.

"You do not seem to understand," he remarked.

sharply; "do you not know the danger, the peril that hangs over you?"

She did not; but of what use was it to say so?

"Try to collect yourself and understand," he continued; "time presses. I cannot keep them away much longer. You must depart at once without being seen. No one must know at what hour you went. You must go to your father's house and wait there. If it should be needful to send you abroad, I will arrange it."

"Have I done so very wrong?" she murmured.

The earl cried out passionately:

"Heaven give me patience! You must be mad to ask me such a question. One would think you did not know what wrong meant."

Hildred stood quite still, looking almost helplessly at him.

"You do not seem to realize or to know what you have done," he said, hastily.

"I do, I do," she moaned; "and there will be no pardon. I wish that I might fling myself into that lake. I would, but that there is a life to come."

"Hildred," said the earl, sternly, "listen to me. I have told you that you must never re-enter my doors; but you bear my name, and for my name's sake I will shield you. The Countess of Caraven may have done wrong, but the world must not know it. I must save you from the consequences of your mad folly. See—I went quietly to your rooms and have brought you these." He gave her a cloak and a bonnet with a thick veil. "I found them in your wardrobe. Have you any money?"

"No," she replied, vacantly, "none."

He took out his purse and gave it to her.

"I would accompany you," he said, "but that it would draw down suspicion on you. I must be here to ward it off. Wrap yourself in this cloak. Hide all that amber satin."

With cold, trembling hands she obeyed him. Suddenly she remembered the rubies. She unclasped the necklace and bracelets.

"Take these," she said; and the earl took them—it was better, he thought, to humor her.

"Now you quite understand, Hildred? You must not go near Court Raven—you are known there. You must walk to Worseley; that is a larger station; no one will know you. Take a ticket for London. When you reach there, hail a cab and go straight to your father's house. Are you quite sure that you understand?"

"Yes; what must I say to my father?" she asked.

"You had better tell him the truth. He is a quick, keen man of the world; he will know far better than I do what should be done. Tell him all."

"Yes," she replied, mechanically.

"Now hasten away from here, Hildred," he said. "I am in mortal fear. You understand all. You know the road to Worseley—it is direct—you take the high-road without turning. Good-bye."

She raised her dark, sad eyes to his face; all the love, the passion, the regret, that she could not put into words, was revealed in them.

"Good-bye," she repeated.

He did not hold out his hand to her. Had he been

speaking to the merest stranger, his voice could not have been colder or more stern. Then he turned quickly away, and Lady Caraven walked across the coppice and through a lane into the high-road. She walked quite mechanically. She had to go to Worseley, to take a train for London, and then go to her father's house. She repeated the words over and over again to herself, like a child who dreads forgetting a lesson. Her face was deadly pale; her limbs trembled with cold. The golden stars shone down upon her; the night-winds whispered round her. She walked on, unconscious of it all.

It was the early dawn of morning when she reached the station—a large railroad junction, where she was both unknown and unnoticed. The train started for London in half an hour. No one spoke to her or appeared to see her, as she took her place, and in a few minutes more she was on her way.

It was a hard punishment—terribly hard for such a trifle, she thought, wondering that the earl could be so stern. She was tired, fatigued, exhausted with passion and emotion. She had neither eaten, drank, nor slept since the evening before. When she reached London she asked a porter to call a cab for her, and gave the address: "Mr. Ransome, the Hollies, Kew,"—and the drive thither seemed to her more than ever like a dream.

CHAPTER XL

"YOU SHOT LADY HAMILTON"

Arley Ransome had not worked quite so hard of late; there was but little need. He had achieved the height of his ambition; he had a large fortune; he was able to speak of his daughter, the Countess of Caraven; he could claim kinsmanship through his daughter with some of the noblest families in England. There was no need now to work quite so hard; he could linger over his daintily-spread breakfast-table and read his papers at his leisure, content if he reached the city before noon. On this morning he had seated himself so as to enjoy three things at once—the beautiful view of the river from his window, the bright fire in the grate and the *recherche* little breakfast that had been served up to him. It was a sudden shock to him when, on hearing a sound, he raised his eyes to the door, and saw there a pale, beautiful woman, who stood wringing her hands.

"Father," she said, "I am come home."

In utter amazement he started from his seat. His daughter, his beautiful Hildred, the Countess of Caraven, pale as death, wrapped in a dark traveling-cloak! What could it mean?

"I—I am very glad to see you, my dear," he said; but he had a horrible foreboding that something ter-

rible had occurred, and that the days of his greatness had vanished. "Come in, pray come in, my dear—do not stand there. How strange you look! Where is Caraven? Dear, dear, how odd it is! Come in, Hildred—the servants will think it strange to see you standing there."

She entered the room and walked up to him with haughty mien.

"This is the end of my marriage, father," she said, calmly—"the marriage that you told me could be happy without love. This is the end of it, and I am come home."

"Sit down, my dear, sit down; there is nothing so horrible as a scene, and this looks like one. Take off your cloak and your bonnet. What a strange head-dress!"

She unfastened the thick traveling-cloak, and there in picturesque disarray was the rich evening dress of amber and black, with a faded crimson flower clinging to it. The lawyer looked on in utter dismay. This disregard for dress and appearances spoke more forcibly than anything else could have done—told more plainly than words that something dreadful had happened.

"Evening toilet, Hildred! Pray, my dear, put on your cloak again. I do not know—I was not prepared—put it on quickly, before any of the servants come in. What is it, Hildred—what is the matter?"

"Not much, father," she replied, drearily; "my marriage has not turned out well, and I am come home, you see."

"But that is nonsense—you cannot come home. What is the matter? Tell me," and the lawyer, with a very resigned expression of face, put away his *pate de foi gras* and folded his hands to listen to his daughter's story.

"You have not quarreled with the earl, I hope—that is, you have not left him?"

"He has sent me away," she replied, and Arley Ransome's face grew very dark.

"There is not much to tell," she continued, wearily. "You misled me—you told me that marriage could be happy without love. I find that love is the soul of it, that without love marriage is like a dead body. I, being the weaker and inferior, was the first to learn to love. I learned to love my husband—he has never cared for me."

"You are too sentimental, Hildred," said Arley Ransome, severely.

"I have been doing my best for my husband," she continued, "and we were growing happier. In time I think that he would have loved me; but someone else, a fair woman—one of the kind of women that he admires—Lady Hamilton, came, and—"

"I see," said the lawyer—"the old story, jealousy and quarreling. Surely, Hildred, you have not thrown away the labor of a lifetime by growing jealous and vexing the earl?"

"I have done worse than that," she said—"far worse. I was jealous of Lady Hamilton. I thought that both she and my husband were deriding me. I followed them when they went out to see the sun set

over the lake. I hid myself behind the alder-trees to listen if they said anything about me; and then—I cannot tell how it happened—my husband saw me. He was very angry; he said that I was never to enter his doors again, but to return home at once to you."

The lawyer's face cleared.

"You are quite sure that you have told me the whole truth?" he said.

"Yes, quite sure. What should I keep from you? It seems a very hard punishment for what was merely a fault rather of judgment than anything else. I told the earl that I loved him, and that jealousy had driven me mad."

"You told him that? Then rely upon it, in a few days all will be well. He will forget his anger, and come to you."

"I do not think so," she returned.

"You are quite sure, Hildred, that you have hidden nothing from me?" he interrogated; adding, "It is, as you say, severe punishment for so small a fault."

She looked up at him in surprise.

"What can I have to hide, papa? In telling you of my love and my jealousy, I have told you the worst."

"Then all will come right again. In the meantime keep up appearances, go to your own room unobserved, and wait until your luggage arrives. I shall say that you are come for a few days' change. Keep up your spirits; all will come right again, I feel sure."

"I am very tired, papa," she said. "I think I will stay in my room to-day."

"Very well, my dear; do just as you like; you know

best, of course. I will say that you do not feel very well. Go to your room, by all means. I hope you will soon be better. Now try to cheer up; it will be all right; I will see to this difficulty with your husband for you."

She looked up at him proudly.

"You must not interfere, papa! I shall never return to him now!"

He looked pityingly at the white face.

"You appear very ill, Hildred. Is there nothing that I can do for you?"

"Nothing," she replied, coldly.

In her heart she felt bitterly angry with her father. She had trusted him, he had misled her. She did not offer to kiss him or to touch his hand, but went quietly out of the room and upstairs, leaving him with some very unpleasant thoughts.

It had not been an agreeable interruption to his breakfast, but he tried to think little of it. It was only a quarrel after all, and his daughter had done nothing wrong. He should make it all right in a few seconds when he saw the earl. He wrote to him before he went to the city, telling him that his wife had reached home safely, but was looking very ill.

The rest of that day Hildred remained in her room, and on the morning following she had not come downstairs. It was after noon when Arley Ransome, with a face as pale as death, asked for admittance to her apartment.

She bade him enter, and he did so, with an open letter in his hand. It was her husband's writing, she perceived.

"You have deceived me," said her father, sternly; "you told me that you had hidden nothing from me. Your husband tells me that he has hidden you here because you shot Lady Hamilton on the evening of the thirty-first—shot her with intent to murder—and that you confessed your guilt!"

Without a word or a murmur, she looked at him, and then fell like one dead at his feet.

CHAPTER XLI

"SHE LOVED HIM AS NO ONE ELSE EVER COULD"

The young countess, as she stood behind the alder-crees at Ravensmere, had heard the sound of a shot; she was too dazed with her own grief and misery to note the direction from which it had proceeded. She had fancied that something went whirring through the trees. That something was the ball that had been fired at Lady Hamilton, which pierced her shoulder, and would have pierced her heart had it gone in the direction in which it had been aimed.

For the moment Lord Caraven had been too bewildered to know what had happened; what he was saying in reality to his guest was that he liked his wife's maiden name better than any he had ever heard. Lady Hamilton, who never liked to hear anyone praised but herself, asked at once what it was. He had answered, "Hildred Ransome;" and those were the words Lady Caraven had heard. They had been no sooner uttered than Lady Hamilton fell on his shoulder with a faint, low cry—a cry that seemed almost simultaneous with the firing of the shot.

The earl knew she had been shot, but by whom or why he could not guess. He laid her down for one minute while he looked around; then it was that he saw the white face of his wife. He jumped to the

conclusion that she had done it; she, and no other, was there on the spot. She had even herself avowed her jealousy. She had followed them, and in the madness of her folly had shot Lady Hamilton. No other idea occurred to him. He said to himself at once that it was so, and he implicitly believed it. He had rushed to her and told her that she was a "guilty woman." She had owned it. But they were speaking of different kind of guilt. He meant the guilt of murder; she meant the guilt of being a spy upon him. No doubt of her guilt relieved his mind. Even in that first bewildered moment he said to himself that she should never enter his house again, but that he would shield her because she bore his name. He had told her to remain where she was while he carried the senseless lady to the house.

There was a terrible consternation. He had the presence of mind to throw the agitated inquirers off the scent. He said that the poachers were out—must be out for a chance shot fired in the woods had wounded Lady Hamilton. Some of the gentlemen staying at the house went with the keepers to scour the woods. Dire were the threats of vengeance as to the rogue who had done the mischief. Meanwhile a groom was dispatched to Court Raven to summon a doctor—the wounded lady had been taken to her room and laid on the bed. At first the earl was frightened lest the wound should prove mortal; but one of the ladies staying at the castle, who knew something of surgery, declared that the wound was not dangerous, and that the ball could soon be extracted. After hearing that,

the earl returned to his unhappy young wife. His first great fear that she had been guilty of murder had been removed; there remained the fear lest the wound should prove dangerous in the end. It was better, he thought, that she should go away at once.

He made two announcements to his household, which no one even thought of connecting. The first and most startling was, of course, that Lady Hamilton had been shot accidentally—a chance shot—though why a ball-cartridge had been used was a puzzle—supposed to have been fired by poachers in the wood; the second was that Lady Caraven had been suddenly summoned to her father's house in London. No one dreamed of connecting the two announcements, and in the disordered state of the household it never occurred to any of the guests to question the servants as to when the countess had gone. She had been sent for after dinner, and the apologies that the earl made were deemed quite sufficient. Some of the guests indeed said that it was as well Lady Caraven was out of the way, as she would probably have been greatly distressed. To this day the earl is uncertain what in his panic he said or did. The only idea quite clear to him was that he must shield the woman who bore his name.

It was not very long before the doctor arrived, and then all alarm was at an end. He found the ball at once; it had not gone very deep into the shoulder. It was extracted, and the wound bound up.

Then lovely Lady Hamilton raised her head, and asked, languidly:

"Shall I be very ill, doctor?"

"No; I hope not. You will suffer a little pain—nothing much, I trust."

"Shall I be ill for a long time?" she asked. "Ah me! how little I dreamed that I was coming to Ravensmere to be shot!"

"It is very unfortunate," said the doctor; "but I do not think you will be ill very long, Lady Hamilton. You must take heart."

"To think that of all the people in the world they should select me! I suppose it was quite an accident though. They were poachers, I am told. Now, doctor, I want to ask you a very serious question."

The doctor seemed to imply by his manner that he was all attention.

"I shall be very happy to answer it, if it lies in my power," he said.

"Tell me—shall I lose—that is—will my temporary seclusion interfere at all with what I may call my good looks?"

He told himself that the amusement he felt must be carefully concealed.

"I think," he replied, confidentially, "that I may reassure your ladyship. I do not see how it can possibly affect you in that fashion, and the needful rest will be most beneficial to you."

Then she was content to remain in her room, not suffering very much pain. To be petted, indulged, made a great heroine of, to be the center of all anxiety, was very pleasant to her. She knew that all her admirers would be in a state of anxiety about her,

that a hundred perfumed notes would reach her every day, that flowers and fruits, newspapers, books, all the trifles invalids love, would be showered upon her; above all, she would be a great source of interest to the handsome earl. She did not think very much about who had shot her; there were poachers about, and it must have been a stray shot—no one had done it purposely, for, as the lovely lady told herself with a smile, she had not an enemy in the whole wide world.

The keepers had made strenuous efforts to find the poachers, but they had evidently made their escape, frightened, doubtless, at what they had done. No trace of them could be found.

It was with a sense of relief that Lord Caraven went to his room that night. He wanted to be alone to think over the events of the day. He found himself dwelling less on the terrible fact that his wife had shot Lady Hamilton than on the wonderful fact that she loved him.

"I have gone mad—I love you—let me die!"

The words haunted him like the refrain of a song.

He could not sleep. All night the pale, passionate, beautiful face was before him. The words rang in his ears as they had rung when he saw Hildred in the starlight, pleading, praying, accusing him, all in one vehement storm of words. So he would see her until he died. He felt as though she had been a stranger to him until then. The passionate love which had flamed into hot jealousy had been hidden under a cold, calm exterior. How she loved him! He had

never seen any woman's face light up so splendidly. For the first time in his life he owned to himself that by the side of her magnificent beauty blonde loveliness faded into nothing. He wondered that he had lived so long in the house with her, so long under one roof, yet had not noticed that which everyone else remarked.

He was struck most of all by the fact that she loved him. It did not matter about anything else. He had read her truth and her love in her face. She loved him as no one else ever would or could; and it flashed across him that the wife he had neglected and despised was, notwithstanding what she had done, one of the noblest women in the world. If it had but been different; if he had but thought more of her before this happened! How she must have loved him to let herself drift into such a crime! Was there anyone who had ever loved him half so well?

"I wish it had never happened," he said to himself. "She is a noble woman in spite of all, and I—well, I could have loved her, but now she must never return."

Yet it showed how strongly his feelings were swayed when he thought far less of wounded Lady Hamilton than of the fact that his wife loved him.

He could not sleep or rest. Never had his pillow seemed so hard, his thoughts so troublesome. The excitement had been too much for him. Wherever he went, whatever he did, his thoughts were with Hildred. Had she reached Arley Ransome's house? Had he acted wisely in letting her go alone? Would any clue to her guilt ever be found? These questions followed

him, haunted him, pursued him. If he went to talk to any of his visitors, the conversation was sure to turn upon the poachers and Lady Hamilton.

Wearied of it all he sought refuge with Sir Raoul in his room; and the soldier noted with concern how worn and haggard the handsome earl looked.

CHAPTER XLII

"I AM SORRY I DID NOT KILL HER"

Greatly disturbed in his mind about his wife, and worried excessively by troublesome inquiries as to the accident which had happened to Lady Hamilton, Lord Caraven determined to seek refuge with his kinsman, Sir Raoul Laureston.

"Let me stay with you, Raoul," said the earl on entering his room; "my guests tease me to death. One hears of nothing but Lady Hamilton and the poachers. I have had to tell the story over and over again, until I am fairly tired of it. Let me find rest here."

Sir Raoul looked at the earl's haggard face.

"Poor boy," he said; "it is rather hard for you certainly. I promise you that I will mention neither Lady Hamilton nor the poachers."

"Poachers!" repeated the earl, contemptuously. "Surely you—" He paused; he had been on the brink of betraying the secret that he had sworn never to reveal.

Sir Raoul laughed.

"It seems to me," he said, "that you are just as bad as anyone else. You cannot keep away from the topic."

"We will discuss the weather, the last new book, politics, the papers—anything," proposed the earl;

and then he added, "that reminds me—some version of this story is sure, I suppose, to get abroad. The papers will make a sensational affair of it."

"I thought we were to avoid the topic," said Sir Raoul, quietly. "Now you have touched upon it again."

"And to make matters worse," remarked the earl, with a gesture of weary despair, "here comes the doctor."

Dr. Randall entered the room unannounced, and in great haste. The earl sprang from his seat at the sound of his agitated voice, his face growing pale and anxious.

"Surely," he said, "Lady Hamilton is not worse?"

"No, she seems better. It is not about Lady Hamilton that I want you, Lord Caraven. I was sent for the moment I left here in behalf of the man who used to act as your steward—John Blantyre."

"John Blantyre," said the earl, vaguely. "Is he ill?" The subject did not interest him very much—indeed he thought it trivial amid the excitement of his own affairs.

"No, not ill in the common acceptation of the term," answered the doctor. "He is dying, I fear."

"Dying, yet not ill! You speak in riddles, doctor."

"It is all a riddle to me," said the physician; "perhaps you can solve it. He has committed suicide—that is, he has made an attempt on his life, but he has not quite succeeded."

"He was very foolish," remarked the earl. Even the fact that his confidential steward had attempted to de-

stroy his own life seemed to him a matter of less moment than the fact that his wife loved him.

Dr. Randall looked uneasily at the unconscious face.

"May I speak on a private matter?" he said.

"Certainly," was the quick reply. "I have no secrets from my relative, Sir Raoul."

"I cannot quite understand it," continued the doctor. "They sent for me, and when I reached the house I found that Blantyre had attempted to take his life. I will not tell you how—there is no need to add to a list of horrors. I found him dying, not dead; he is dying now. His only cry was for you, Lord Caraven; he wanted to see you."

"I do not in the least desire to see him," said the earl, quickly. "Frankly speaking, doctor, repentant sinners and death-beds are not much in my line. I could do him no good."

"Perhaps not—yet he gave me no rest until I had promised to ask you to visit him—no rest at all. The strange part of the story has to come, Lord Caraven. It was not a poacher who fired the shot—it was himself. We have this time done the poachers an injustice."

The doctor was not prepared for the effect of his words. The earl sprang from his chair, rushed across the room, and seized him by the arm.

"Say that again," he cried. "John Blantyre fired that shot?"

"So he says," replied the doctor. "He gasped the story out to me in broken words. 'I always hated her,' he said, 'hated her: and last night I shot her by the

edge of the lake. I shot her through the heart, and I saw her fall, and'—"

"It is impossible!" cried the earl. "The man must have been delirious! He never saw Lady Hamilton in his life—how could he hate her?"

"That is the strangest part of the story," said the doctor. "He persists in saying that he shot Lady Caraven. I cannot understand the matter."

"I do," put in Sir Raoul, calmly. "Blantyre was dismissed at Lady Caraven's desire, and he swore to be revenged upon her. This is his revenge—he shot Lady Hamilton, believing her to be the countess."

"It is impossible!" repeated the earl. "They are so different. Lady Hamilton is fair, the countess dark—he could not mistake them."

Suddenly he remembered that it was in the semi-darkness of night that the occurrence had happened and Lady Hamilton was wrapped in a silvery veil. Could he have mistaken them? The doctor shook his head.

"I do not understand—it is, as I have said, a riddle to me. I should certainly advise you, Lord Caraven, to see the man; that is the only way to clear up the mystery."

"There is no mystery," said Sir Raoul. "It is as I say: the man intended to murder Lady Caraven—by mistake he has shot Lady Hamilton. How he mistook them is, perhaps, a mystery, and that you can solve by going to see him. Go, Ulric."

"Yes," responded Lord Caraven, "I will go—I will go with you, doctor, if you are ready. Raoul, it would be as well not to mention this."

"You may rely upon me," said his friend.

The doctor and the earl quitted the room together. The carriage was ordered, and they drove at once to Court Raven.

They were not long in finding Blantyre's house, and before long the earl stood by the death-bed of his late steward. The man's dying face was turned toward him, his dying eyes gleamed as they recognized him.

"My lord," he said, "you were always kind to me. Her ladyship ruined me—she turned me away—and I hated her. I would not harm one hair of your head; but I have killed her, and I am not sorry, I am glad."

"Whom have you killed?" asked the earl, calmly.

The dying eyes glared.

"Whom? The Countess of Caraven, the beautiful, proud, imperious woman, who with one wave of her hand sent me to ruin—I have killed her."

"How did you kill her?" inquired the earl.

A wild laugh came from the man's lips.

"How? I have watched and waited many a long day. I have stood in the high-road when she passed by, but never until the other night did I get one chance. I could have shot her dead a hundred times, but I would not, lest in taking her life I took also the life of one who had never harmed me. I hated her because she ruined me. She drove me from my place, she left me branded as a thief among my fellow men, she left me without character, without reputation; she was my bane and my curse, so I shot her. But I am not all bad, and I was sorry when I saw her fall dead. I came home, but she followed me; she has stood near

to me ever since—a woman with dead eyes, awful to look upon—awful to see.”

“Tell me,” said the earl, quietly, “how did you know that it was my wife?”

An expression of cunning came over the dying face.

“I knew her by the scarf—her silver scarf—she wore it over her arms the first time I saw her.”

“You tried to take a terrible revenge,” said Lord Caraven.

“It has been worse for me,” returned the dying man—“a thousand times worse for me. I went five times after five different situations, and on each occasion it was flung scornfully in my face that I had been dismissed from Ravensmere. When I found that I was ruined, I swore that I would kill her ladyship, and I have done it.”

“Thank heaven that you have not!” said the earl, hastily. “I am thankful to say that your murderous shot never reached my wife. The lady you have injured is a stranger to you—Lady Hamilton; she had thrown Lady Caraven’s scarf over her shoulders—hence the (for me) fortunate mistake.”

The look on the dying man’s face was terrible to see—the fiendish disappointment, the bitter hatred.

“Then I have not killed her after all?” he cried.

“No; you have wounded an innocent lady, a stranger to you—that is all; my dear wife you have not injured.”

“And I sent for you believing that she was dead, dreading lest an innocent man should suffer for my deed, longing, also, that you should know I had taken my revenge.”

"I can only thank heaven you have failed," said the earl. John Blantyre raised himself; the hatred, the bad passions in the dying face were terrible to see.

"Tell her," he cried, "I am sorry I did not kill her; tell her that she ruined me and that I hate her for it; tell her that I sent her my curse, and that after I had cursed her I never opened my lips again!"

He fell back exhausted, and he kept his word. Never again were his lips opened in mortal speech. The earl tried, Sir Raoul left his sick-room to try to soften and persuade him, gentle, low-voiced women knelt by his side, a grave minister pleaded with him—it was all in vain; after that one terrible curse his lips were mute and dumb, whether so stricken by heaven or whether the result of his anger and disappointment no one ever knew; he died in obstinate, sullen silence.

When that last scene was over, the earl, who had remained with him to the end, returned to Ravensmere. John Blantyre's crime and suicide had saddened him inexpressibly. He was not without plenty of sense and reflection. He saw at once that this was the result of his own folly—his inattention to his duties. He had implicitly and blindly trusted this man simply because he was too idle to overlook him and his accounts. What was the result? He had grown reckless with long impunity, and, when his quick, intelligent wife discovered the amount of his peculations, she had dismissed him at once. For what had happened there was only himself to blame.

"How I wish that I could live my life over again," he thought; "I would act differently; but as that is

impossible, I must make the most I can of the time that remains." He was more saddened and unhappy than he ever remembered to have been in his life before. He sought Sir Raoul's room.

"I am quite out of spirits to-day," he said; "let me talk to you, Raoul. This dreadful death of Blantyre has been a shock to me that I shall never get over. I feel as though I am to blame for it, all through my negligence and want of looking after people."

"You have been to blame," agreed Sir Raoul; "I do not deny that. But your indulgence ought not to have made him a thief."

The earl sat down; he laid his head back with a tired, wearied expression.

"How my life has changed, Raoul!" he said. "I seem suddenly to have grown into a man, wiser, sadder than I had ever thought to be. One thing above all others puzzles me—how could I have been so blind or so foolish as to misjudge her?"

"Misjudge whom?" asked Sir Raoul.

"Hildred. Oh! I forgot I did not tell you that! You believed, of course, that she had been sent for."

"Certainly I did!" replied Sir Raoul, in amazement. "Was it not so?"

"No—that is the worst part of my trouble. There is no truth in it. I sent her away myself."

"You sent Hildred away!" echoed Sir Raoul, slowly. "What do you mean, Ulric?"

"I told her that she must never enter my doors again. Now I find that it is all a mistake."

Sir Raoul tried to be patient, but it was very difficult.

"I do not in the least understand what you mean, Ulric. Why did you send Hildred away, and what was a mistake?"

"I shrink from telling you. Upon my honor, I am ashamed of myself. Do you know, Raoul, I positively believed Hildred had done this deed—I believed she had shot Lady Hamilton."

An expression of deepest contempt came over Sir Raoul's face.

"I should never have imagined such a thought would enter your breast," he said indignantly. "I speak plainly to you, Ulric, as I have never done before—your wife is wasted on you—she is a thousand times too good for you. She is one of the noblest, truest, purest women under the sun. You—if you could so misjudge her—are to be pitied. Hildred capable of murder? Heaven give me patience! I could not have believed you would entertain such an idea. I could not have imagined that you were so utterly devoid of reason."

"Listen, Raoul—do not judge me quite so harshly. You do not know all. Let me tell you my story."

And without further discussion the earl related the whole history.

Sir Raoul listened in silence.

"Great heaven!" he cried, at last, "to think what a heart you have thrown away!"

"But, Raoul," he rejoined, "when I found her hiding behind the trees, and she owned she was guilty, what was I to think?"

"Careless as you have been of her," said Sir Raoul,

"you might have known her better. If I heard her say such a thing, I should, even in spite of her own words, believe in her innocence. Shame on you, Caraven, that I, a stranger to her, should have to take up her defense! Shame on you that you did not understand her better! She had learned to love you, poor child! I thought she would. You drove her mad with her slighted, wounded love and her jealousy, and she followed you; that was what she meant when she owned that she was guilty. She meant guilty of loving you when you have studiously neglected her—guilty of jealousy when there was love. I understand her words, even if you do not."

"I am very sorry," said the earl, humbly; "doubly sorry, because, you know, Raoul, I was really beginning to love and care for her."

"Beginning!" cried Sir Raoul. "I hope that I shall keep my patience. Beginning to love her! You will have to answer hereafter for all these long months of neglect and unkindness. To me your sin appears a terrible one. You had one of the noblest women in the world for your wife, and to gratify your foolish whims you have neglected her. Shame on you, Caraven—you are no man to treat such a wife in such a fashion!"

"What can I do?" asked the earl, humbly.

"Whither have you sent her?" was the stern inquiry.

"To her father's house," replied the earl.

"Then I will tell you what to do. Go as fast as steam can take you and ask her pardon. She is a noble woman, she may forgive: but," added the soldier,

frankly, with a flush on his honest face, "I declare that if I were in her place I never would."

The earl took the advice offered him, and went straight off to town.

CHAPTER XLIII

'YOU HAVE MADE MY LIFE HATEFUL TO ME'

Lady Caraven had refused to see anyone; she had refused to quit her apartment. The horror of the charge made against her overpowered her. Her husband believed her guilty of intent to murder. At first that was the only idea her mind could grasp—a horrible, distorted idea. She could not think clearly. Her husband, whom she had saved from ruin, whom she had roused from indolence and self-indulgence, whose better nature she had called into life, whom she loved with a passionate love, had judged her guilty of murder. She could not realize it; she could not put her thoughts into words; they assumed no tangible form. Then slowly enough she returned to a clear memory of what had happened.

Someone had shot Lady Hamilton; who it was, or how it had happened, she could not tell. Then she remembered having heard the shot fired, of which at the time she had thought so little. She remembered how something had whizzed through the trees. By degrees all the events of that dreadful night returned to her clearly and forcibly—the startled cry, the sound that came from the borders of the lake, the tramp of many feet—and she wondered that all these things had had no significance for her when her husband had

cried, "You guilty, cruel woman!" and she had owned herself guilty. Then she saw how the mistake had arisen. They had been playing at cross-purposes. He meant that she was guilty of murder; she meant that she was guilty of jealousy and of following him. She was in despair. Of what avail would it be now to defend herself, to tell him that she was not guilty, to try to clear herself? Her husband would never believe her; he would always suspect her because of her own words.

"Was there ever a fate like mine?" cried the unhappy girl. "What have I done that such a lot in life should be mine?"

Her courage, her bravery, her hope and faith seemed all to give way. She was in despair. Her husband believed her guilty of a great crime, and she had no means of proving her innocence. The only hope that remained to her was that the real criminal would confess, and so free her from the accusation; but that was most unlikely. In her own mind she believed that some lover of Lady Hamilton's, wild with jealousy, had fired at her; if so, it was most unlikely that he would accuse himself.

No, there was no hope. She had striven so bravely to bear cruel fate; she had done her best; she had made a brave fight where many people would have run away—and now it was all ended. So far was her husband from loving her that he believed her guilty of a crime. The girl's heart failed her utterly; she would fain have turned her face to the wall and died.

"Sir Raoul would not have believed it," she said to

herself; "he would have defended me." All hope was at an end. She felt that she could never interest herself in life again. Then a vague but none the less terrible fear came over her. She could not tell what might happen. Suppose that Lady Hamilton should die! Someone must be punished. Her husband had said that he would keep her secret, but suppose that he found it impossible to do so—that, from circumstantial evidence, others suspected and accused her—what would she do? There could be no defense. She had been found behind the trees, and she had said she was guilty. Could it be within the bounds of possibility that she, Hildred, Countess of Caraven, would ever be brought before a public tribunal and tried for a crime of which she was perfectly innocent? Her vivid imagination ran riot about it. She pictured herself in a dark cell. She wept until from sheer exhaustion she slept.

A knocking at the door aroused her.

"Hildred," called Arley Ransome, "I wish to see you."

"Papa," said the girl, "I am tired of the world—tired of my life. Let me die in peace."

Fearful of drawing the attention of his servants, he went away, returning again and again with the same entreaty, but she would not see him. She refused all food, she never attempted to go to rest, and at last Arley Ransome grew alarmed about her. He would not force open the door—that would create a scandal, and the notion of scandal was as bitter as death to him. It was with a feeling of intense relief that he saw Lord Caraven arrive.

"This is a terrible business," he said. "My daughter must have been driven to great extremes before she did this."

"It is all a foolish mistake," cried the earl. "Where is she? I want to see her."

"A mistake!" said the lawyer, with dignity. "Most men would give your conduct another name, Lord Caraven. People should be careful before they make such mistakes."

"Where is Hildred?" cried the earl. "I want to see her at once."

"I am not at all sure that my daughter will see you," said Arley Ransome. "I must say that she has been cruelly treated. You are a peer of the realm, Lord Caraven, but have you behaved as a gentleman to my child? Have you treated her with courtesy or affection?"

"No, I have not, but this is not the time to discuss such subjects. I want to see my wife—to apologize to her."

That utterance cost the proud earl a great effort. It did not conciliate Arley Ransome.

"Something more than an apology is due, my lord," he said, gravely. "You write to me, telling me that my daughter has been guilty of an attempt to murder. In the silence and darkness of night you send her from her home as though she were one of the guiltiest criminals in the world. You denounce her to me, and then you hurry after her, saying that it is all a mistake. Such mistakes are not to be pardoned, my lord."

The earl kept his patience with great difficulty.

'Will you let me see my wife?' he cried.

Arley Ransome saw that he had gone as far as prudence would permit him to go.

'I can tell you nothing of your wife, Lord Caraven,' he said; 'I hardly know whether she is living or dead.'

The earl's face changed.

'Is she ill?' he cried.

'Even that I cannot tell you,' answered the lawyer. 'My daughter has shut herself up in her room, and has refused to see anyone. I can only say that since she heard you had believed her guilty of that crime she has neither eaten, drank, nor slept.'

'Let me go to her at once,' said Lord Caraven. 'Do not be hard on me, Mr. Ransome—I have had a great deal to suffer.' And these few words disarmed the lawyer.

They went together to Hildred's room. Arley Ransome spoke first.

'Hildred, I have something very particular to say to you—open the door.'

There was not a sound and Lord Caraven began to feel slightly alarmed.

'Hildred,' said her father, 'I have a message from your husband.'

Still there was no sound, and unable to control himself, the earl cried out:

'Hildred, for heaven's sake speak to me! Let me in—I want to see you!'

The sound of his voice seemed to have an electric effect upon her. The next moment she turned the key in the lock and opened wide the door.

With a cry of fear and surprise, he started back when he saw her. He had seen her lately so beautiful, so radiant—now her long black hair hung in disorder over her shoulders; her face was pale and stained with tears, her eyes were dim, her lips white. He hardly knew her.

"Hildred!" he cried.

She looked at him with dim, sad eyes. "You!" she said. "Is it you, who thought me guilty of murder?"

Lord Caraven turned to Arley Ransome.

"Leave me alone with her," he said. "I have much to say."

Mr. Ransome went away. The earl entered the room and closed the door. He went to his wife, holding out both his hands.

"Will you forgive me?" he said; "I can never pardon myself."

But she shrank from him.

"You believed that I committed murder," she answered. "No, I cannot touch your hands."

"Hildred, listen. It was almost all your own fault—you said you were guilty."

"Not of murder," she rejoined. "I could not have supposed that you would think me capable of that, much as you dislike me."

"I do not dislike you, Hildred," said the earl, in a voice full of emotion: "and I am, indeed, grieved at having offended you. Do not refuse to pardon me."

"There can be no pardon, my lord, for the wrong you have done me," she replied.

And then the earl knew that, if ever he won his

wife's pardon, it would be a work of patience and of time.

"I cannot believe," he said, "that you will be unkind or unjust to me, Hildred—I have suffered more than you have."

"That is not possible," she rejoined; "no one has accused you of a terrible crime."

"But I have suspected an innocent person," he said, "and it is harder to inflict than to bear pain."

"My pain would not displease or discompose you," she said.

There was something in her manner which half-frightened him—she seemed as though her brain were dazed. She did not appear like herself. He began to wonder if suffering and suspense had really driven her mad.

"Hildred," he said, very gently, "do you know that you frighten me?"

"Do I?" she asked, drearily. "I am glad. You ought to be frightened about me. I have never done you any harm, and you have been most unkind to me—you have been cruel to me, you have made my life hateful to me."

"Nay, it is surely not so bad as that?"

"It could not well be worse," she said.

He gazed anxiously at her. She looked pale and wan, with the stains of bitter weeping on her face. He saw, too, that she shivered like one seized with mortal cold.

"Hildred," he cried, "do forgive me—you do not know how grieved I am to see you like this. I want

to tell you how the misunderstanding happened. Will you listen?"

"Yes," she replied, mechanically, and she sat silent and motionless while he told her the story. She looked at him when it was ended with dull, dim eyes.

"I am very sorry," she said, "that Blantyre made the mistake. I almost wish that he had shot me through the heart. What have I to live for?"

"I could not spare you, Hildred—you have been the good angel of my life!" he cried.

"You would be better without me. Your estates are free and unencumbered now—you have roused yourself to a sense of your duties—you know how to perform them. I am of no more use. I am sorry that John Blantyre missed his aim."

"That is not like you, Hildred. Where is your bright energy, your hope, your cheerful animation?"

She clasped her hands with a shudder.

"I am sick," she said—"sick with a terrible despair."

He was at a loss what to say to her—she seemed immovable. Suddenly her face flushed, and a bright light came in the eyes that had been so dim.

"You sent me from your house, Lord Caraven, and pronounced me guilty on what seems to me very light evidence. I may claim to be at least as credulous as yourself, yet I declare that had anyone accused you of murder I should not have believed it. You judged me guilty at once—guilty of trying to murder—I, who never in my life trampled even upon a worm. Why should you have thought that I wished Lady Hamilton dead?"

He looked slightly confused.

"You remember that you told me you were jealous of her," he replied.

"Jealous," she repeated, drearily. "Did I ever love you then? I have forgotten—my brain is dazed, dull. I seem to remember nothing clearly, except that you judged me guilty of murder. Did I love you?"

The wan face and dim eyes touched him inexpressibly.

"You have said so, Hildred. I hope you will say the same again," he answered.

"Never, if you thought me guilty of murder," she said, decisively. "My life has been a sore disappointment to me; it has been hard to bear; it has not had one gleam of light. But it is all over now. Now that you have accused me of murder, I have no further interest in it."

She looked so hopeless and so dreary that he was deeply pained. It struck him, too, that she looked terribly ill.

"Hildred," he said, gently, "be merciful. I am much to blame; but you will surely pardon me."

He tried to touch her hands, but she drew them proudly away. She stood before him erect and defiant.

"I had my life given me to enjoy, as others had," she said. "I had the power of loving, the longing for happiness, as others had. What right had you to crush them? What right had you, because you wanted my money, to take my girlish heart and break it? What right had you to inflict all these years of shame and

sorrow upon me? What have I ever done to you that you should repay me after this fashion?"

"Nothing," he replied. "I am guilty."

"When you thought I had tried to commit murder, you turned me from your doors; in the darkness of night, alone and unfriended, you bade me be gone. Which kind of murder is worse—that which destroys a body, or that which slays heart, mind, brain, and hope? I say that in this sense you have slain me."

"Hildred, be merciful to me!" he cried.

"I will show you the same mercy that you have shown me. Go from my presence and do not let me see you again."

"Do you mean that, Hildred?" he asked, sadly.

"I do. You have disliked, despised, scorned me, ever since we first met. Now that you have suspected me of a crime you have reached the climax. We shall meet no more."

"You said that you loved me, Hildred," he pleaded.

"Did I?" she replied, with a harsh laugh. "Then I take back my words. I love you no more; you have been cruel to me—as cruel as the men who put out the bright eyes of a little bird that it may sing more sweetly. Let me pass; I have no more to say."

With shining eyes, and pale, passionate face, she swept from the room, leaving the earl overcome with astonishment.

"She is the most high-minded woman I have ever met in my life," he thought. "I have been blind, indeed. How superb she looked in her indignation! I will win her yet. I have never cared about winning

her before, but I swear to give my life to the task now.'

It seemed probable that it would be a very long one, for Lady Caraven positively refused to see her husband again. In vain Arley Ransome pleaded for him; she was inexorable.

"Even a worm will turn when it is trodden upon," she said. "I have suffered my last indignity at his hands."

The earl was compelled to return to Ravensmere, and he did so almost despairingly. Lady Hamilton was fast improving; she would be able to go to her own home soon, the doctor said, and all anxiety about her was quite at an end. The truth of the story had come to light; all the papers had it; everyone knew that Lady Hamilton had been shot by mistake, and that it was the young Countess of Caraven whom John Blantyre had intended to kill.

The earl confided the result of his mission to Sir Raoul, who was not much surprised.

"You have tried her beyond her strength," he said; "I should advise you, without loss of time, to return to London again."

Lord Caraven did so, but his journey was fruitless. Hildred refused to see him; to all entreaties from her father she answered simply:

"I have not one word to add to what I have said;" and with that answer the earl was obliged to be content. In sheer despair he sent for Sir Raoul, who, though almost unfit to travel, hastened to him; he besought him to use his influence with the beautiful young wife who had no pity for him. Then he grew wildly jealous

at the idea that she would listen to Sir Raoul when she refused absolutely to listen to him.

"Why should you have more influence over her than I have?" he asked, half angrily.

"Because," said Sir Raoul, "I understand the higher, better, nobler part of her nature, as you, I fear, will never understand it. I will try what I can do."

"Tell her then, Raoul," went on the earl, his tone and manner changing suddenly, "that I was blind to her beauty, her goodness, her truth, but that I see all now. Tell her that I did not love her when I first knew her, but that I love her now; tell her, if she will but forgive me, I will make the devotion of my whole life atone for my past neglect "

Sir Raoul promised. Lady Caraven did not refuse to see him. He was shocked and startled at the terrible change a few days had wrought in her. He looked at the pale face.

"How you have suffered, Hildred," he said.

"Yes; I came to the end of my patience at last. I can bear it no longer, Raoul; it was a life of torture after all, and I will never return to it. I could not be brave any longer."

"Poor child!" said the grave, pitying voice. "Some words are running in my mind, Hildred, about those who, having put their hand to the plow, turn back again. May I ask, are you one of those, Hildred? Are you tired of heroism?"

"There was no heroism in my life," she said.

"Nay, pardon me; there was the grandest heroism possible. Do you know what my idea of heroism really is?"

She looked up at him with greater interest than she had yet displayed.

"Tell me, Raoul."

"This is the grandest heroism," he said—"the heroism that makes saints and martyrs—bearing the burden of our lives patiently and cheerfully, never failing in strength and endurance. I thought that you would heroically and cheerfully bear the crosses and trials of your life. So you did for a time; now you have laid down your cross, saying that it is too heavy for you to bear. Ah! Hildred! believe me, good was never yet won by cowardice. Take it up again, this burden you have laid down. In the day of adversity fail not—be a heroine until the end."

His words cheered and encouraged her, as they always did.

"What would you have me do?" she asked.

"I would have you lay aside your coldness, your pride, your reserve," he told her. "Do not become a revengeful woman. Your husband has, it is true, outraged and insulted you, but it was a mistake, and he deplores it bitterly. Be generous; leave revenge to small souls and narrow minds; rise above it, and forgive him."

"You do not know, Raoul," she said, "that my heart is sore with trouble."

"I know," he replied, "it is hard to bear, but you must forgive him. You must again take up the duties of your life, resume your occupations, devote yourself to the welfare of your husband, forgive generously and entirely all that has happened, live for the good work

you have begun. Once before I asked you if you were strong enough to take up the burden of your life and carry it bravely. I ask you the same question now."

She was quite silent for a few minutes, and then, as the mist rolls from the hill-tops before the light of the sun, all shadow passed from her face, and she answered him.

"I will. I will do all you advise, Raoul. I will forgive my husband. You say that he loves me now. I shall put his love to the test. If it fails, well and good—I will do my duty without the sunshine of love to cheer me; if it stands the test, I will try to crown his life with my love."

He looked long and lovingly at her.

"You are a brave girl, Hildred—you are a good woman," he said admiringly. "I wish there were more like you. I will tell Ulric that you are willing to save him now."

"If you please," she responded; "but, Raoul, do not repeat what I have said. I want to test his love myself."

CHAPTER XLIV

**"WHEN I BEGAN TO LOVE YOU WITH A LOVER'S LOVE I CAN-
NOT TELL"**

Lady Caraven decided to follow the advice of her friend Sir Raoul and forgive her husband. She received him in the pretty little boudoir in which the few months of her girlish life at home had been spent. It was a pretty room, octagon-shaped, with a large bay-window that looked across the lawn to the river—a room that seemed fitted for a young girl's habitation, with hangings of pink silk and white lace, a profusion of flowers, and a few pretty water-color drawings.

She was standing by the window when he entered.

His step was so light and quiet that she did not hear him at first; and he looked at her for half a minute in silent admiration. The tall slender figure was draped in a plain black silk dress; the dark hair was carelessly arranged after a picturesque fashion; the lovely face had a faint hue of returning health and hope. Her hands were tightly clasped, and the expression on her face was one of deep thought.

"Hildred!" he called, and at the sound of his voice a crimson flush seemed to burn her neck and face. She was quite silent for a minute, and then she turned to him and held out her hand.

"Can you—do you really forgive me?" he asked. "I hardly dare to hope that it is true."

"It is quite true," she replied; and he detected a slight tremor in her voice. "Let me ask a question in my turn. Is it true that you love me?"

"Yes," he answered. "It is as true as that heaven is above me."

"Will you tell me how long you have loved me?" she asked, quietly.

"I will answer you quite truthfully, Hildred," replied the earl; "I cannot tell you. When I first married you—I speak freely—I did not like you; to me you were simply an incumbrance that I was compelled to put up with. I saw nothing in you—neither beauty nor mind; yet we had to live together, and in some kind of way I was grateful to you. For many long months after our marriage I looked upon you simply as an unformed school-girl. The first thing that I awoke to was a knowledge of your beauty. I heard everyone praising it and I began to perceive that in place of an unformed school-girl I had one of the most beautiful women in England for my wife. The next thing that struck me was the way in which you spoke to me; I began to admire your pride and spirit, your noble ideas, your grand notions of duty. The day I saw you dismiss John Blantyre was the day, I believe, on which I first began to love you. Then I admired the way in which you roused me, the way in which you broke up without mercy all my dreamy, luxurious life. I loved you for the brave manner in which you took your stand by duty. But when I began to love you

with a lover's love I cannot tell. On the night of the ball, when I saw what you had inscribed on your tablets—"My husband"—my heart beat faster than it had ever done before, and I felt the greatest inclination to take you in my arms and kiss your face a thousand times; but I could not. After that my love grew. I watched you—you were beautiful and graceful, my love; I listened to you—your words were replete with wit and wisdom; I saw how your whole time was given to useful and noble occupations. But when I began to love you with a lover's love I cannot tell, Hildred. I should like to say one thing to you," he continued, hurriedly—"they are humiliating words for me, but true ones. Whatever there is of good in me, I owe it, my wife, to you. I was sunk in pleasure, in self-indulgence. I had but one idea of life, and that was to get as much from it as possible. I own to you that I never even thought of duty; I hated the word. My thoughts and interests were centered in myself.

"Men died; I cared not, so that I lived. Men starved; I had plenty. Those who depended on me were ground down, oppressed, and burdened. I cared not, so that the means were forthcoming to gratify my desires. My wife, it was you who aroused the nobler soul within me, who taught me to live for others and not for myself, who taught me that there is a pleasure in virtue. After heaven, I owe all that is good in my life to you, and I thank you for it."

She bowed her head in sweetest courtesy. She could not speak to him. His words had filled her heart with the very fullness of joy.

"I am sure," he continued, "that, when a strong chain of circumstances led me to believe that you were guilty of a great crime, the strongest feeling in my heart was disappointment that you were not the angel that I had taken you to be. Then when you had gone, and I was left alone, left without you, I knew that I loved you. I found my life a blank; my thoughts were always with you; my heart had gone with you. Then I knew that I loved you with a lover's love, and that I should never be happy until I had won you."

A glad light came into her dark eyes, but she made no reply. He continued:

"Hildred, as earnestly as a man can speak, I ask you to forgive me. Forgive the base selfishness that married you for money without love and without any knowledge of your real worth. Forgive the insolent neglect, the cruelty, the coldness, the pain I have caused you. Forgive the last and greatest blunder of all—my unjust suspicion. I do not deserve your pardon, but I ask it."

"I forgive you," she replied. "We will bury the past; we will talk of it no more. But, Lord Caraven, I am going to put your love to the test."

He interrupted her.

"Hildred," he said, "do not call me, Lord Caraven; try to say, Ulric." She looked at him with sweet, shy eyes.

"Ulric," she said, "I am going to put your love to the test."

"I may say with safety that it will bear it," he replied.

"Our marriage was a mistake," she said, softly—"perhaps we were not altogether to blame for that. We have made great mistakes since, in which we have both been to blame. What I propose is a year's absence. A cousin of mine, Mrs. Glenvil, is very ill and is ordered to Nice. I ask you to let me go with her. She will be away a year—see what that year will effect. If love of me has sufficient influence over you to keep you good, industrious, active for the benefit of others as you are now, I shall believe that you love me. If in a year's time you come to me and tell me that you love me better than ever, that time and absence have not changed you, I will return with you, and will make you a most loving, devoted wife. Do you accept, my love?"

He stood for a few minutes in thoughtful silence, and then he said:

"Yes; I accept it—I shall be pleased to prove my sincerity to you."

"There need be nothing in it for people to gossip about," she said, shyly. "You have but to tell anyone who inquires that I have gone to Nice with my cousin, and when the twelvemonth has elapsed, that you are going to fetch me home."

"I am willing, Hildred," he said, "and shall count the days and the hours, my wife, until we meet. I never knew how sweet the word 'wife' was, nor how much it meant until now."

As it was agreed, the only persons to whom they told the result of that interview were Sir Raoul and Arley Ransome, who both cordially approved of the

plan, foreseeing that it would end well. Everyone believed that Lady Caraven had been so suddenly summoned because of the illness of Mrs. Glenvil, and when a short paragraph in the fashionable papers told that the young countess was going to Nice for a short time with her cousin, no one had a word to say about the arrangement.

The earl returned to Ravensmere to show all needful politeness and respect for Lady Hamilton. It was a great relief to him when the doctor pronounced her well enough to return home, and he was a little surprised when he found that she regretted leaving Sir Raoul more than anyone else. The noble, honest soldier had made a great impression on the beautiful, fashionable coquette.

"He is a man worth loving," she said to herself.

Then the earl returned to London to see his wife and Mrs. Glenvil off. He went with them to Dover. They had decided upon going to Paris first. He stood for a few minutes on the deck of the steamer before it sailed; he looked with longing, wistful eyes at the face of his young wife.

"Hildred, how I wish that I were going with you!" he said.

"So do I," she replied, with a frank, charming smile. "But that would not do. You must stand the test. You will come to fetch me, and the year will not seem so long."

He sighed as he looked at her.

"I have a kind of fear that I shall be like the naughty boy in the story-book," he said—"I shall meet with

my just punishment, Hildred, if anything should happen to me before the year is out."

"I promise to return to you at once if you are ill or in trouble," she replied earnestly.

"My darling, give me one kiss!" he cried, suddenly.

But the countess drew down her veil. "No," she said, "that would make the parting even harder. Good-bye. Heaven bless you, Ulric!"

"Good-bye, my wife!" he said; and his eyes filled with tears as he watched the steamer cutting her way through the blue waves.

CHAPTER XLV

"THIS IS OUR REAL WEDDING-DAY, HILDRED"

No man ever set to work with greater zeal than did the handsome earl. He did not delay one hour in London; he went back at once to Ravensmere, only eager to begin work. There was to be no more idleness, no more dissipation, no more self-indulgence. He had made up his mind that all the plans his wife had contemplated and begun for the benefit of the estate should be carried out before she returned home. The model cottages should be built, and men with their families residing in them; the schools should not only be erected, but open; the almshouses should be finished, and the old women occupying them. She should find her *protege* Ellen Woodruff installed as portress in one of the lodges; every wish his wife had ever expressed should be carried out, every desire fulfilled; houses should be repaired, farms put in good order—he would neglect not a single thing that she had ever proposed or thought of. No matter what it cost, all should be done. He took Sir Raoul into his confidence, and they found that by employing extra hands the work could be done in the time.

Lord Caraven did not lose an hour. No one looking at him now could have believed that he had ever been indolent. There were days when he rose with

the dawn of the sun and worked without ceasing until it set—days when he found no time for anything but riding round and encouraging the different sets of men to work. Everyone knew at last what his object was—that he wanted all finished before his wife came home.

When that was known, the workers grew even more anxious to please him, for there was not one on the estate, man or woman or child, who was not anxious to please the young countess and who did not love her.

"She will be happy at last," said Sir Raoul to himself as he saw that love for her was gradually but surely influencing the whole of the young earl's life.

Lord Caraven, in the midst of his labors and toils, did not forget to correspond continually with his wife. He wrote to her every week, never telling her what he was doing, but dwelling continually on his passionate love for her, on his intense desire to see her again.

"These are our love letters, Hildred," he wrote once. "This is our courtship. The day on which we meet will be our real wedding-day," and she smiled to herself as she read. He was won at last, and no one but herself knew how happy she was to win him.

So the year passed away. It was thought advisable for Mrs. Glenvil to return before the English winter began, and the beginning of September was fixed upon as the time for her and the countess' return. The earl prayed his wife to allow him to go to Nice to escort them home, as was at first arranged. She answered "No," that her father would do that. She did not

wish to meet him again until she met him at home. Her father would bring her to Court Raven Station; he could meet her there and take her home.

"She is right," said Sir Raoul; "that seems to me more fitting. She is right, as she always is."

So the day came—a bright September day—when all the world seemed changed to the Earl of Caraven. The train was due at the Court Raven Station at three in the afternoon, and the earl was to meet it.

Lord Caraven kept his word. The day was celebrated as a wedding-day. Great tents were erected in the park, and all the children and the tenantry were feasted therein to their hearts' content. There was nothing but rejoicing and merriment and happiness.

The earl stood by the carriage when the train stopped. There was not much time for greeting then. He clasped his wife's hands between his own, hesitated for a moment, and then kissed her.

"My wife—my darling—welcome home!" he said.

Then he helped her into the carriage and took his seat by her side. He saw her face grow pale with emotion as the ringing cheers of men, women, and children fell upon her ear; and as the carriage drove slowly along, more than one rough voice cried:

"Heaven bless your ladyship! Welcome home!"

They drove slowly, for the crowd was great. She had seemed especially to belong to the people, this dark-eyed, beautiful woman, who had worked so hard, and they were delighted to have her in their midst again. The earl had not failed to tell them all, both rich and poor, what they owed to her, and rich and

poor were there to welcome her. The crowd increased as they drove through the park and when the carriage stopped at the great entrance it was wonderful to see the throngs of people. The earl stood up to thank them for their kind and spontaneous greeting. Then he took his wife's hand in his, and a beautiful smile brightened her face as she looked round upon them—there was hardly one in the vast gathering who had not received some kindness, some favor or benefit from her hands.

"My friends," he said, "every man who loves his wife has a pet name for her. My wife is the good angel of my house."

They then passed indoors, followed by the good wishes of all who knew them.

There was a small and early dinner-party at the castle; the members of it were the earl, the countess, Sir Raoul, Arley Ransome, and Mrs. Glenvil. After dinner, Lord Caraven drew his wife's arm within his own.

"This is our real wedding-day, Hildred," he said, "so I am not going to apologize for taking you away from our guests."

They walked across the long drawing-room to the balcony where the last roses of summer were hanging, and where the creepers formed a bower.

"It is not cold," he said. "Will you come out here?"

They went out together, and stood watching the sunset over the trees in the park.

"First of all, Hildred," said the earl, "guess what news I have for you."

"I cannot guess," she replied.

"You would never imagine," he said. "I told you in one of my letters how sorry Lady Hamilton was to leave Sir Raoul."

She looked up at him, her face full of interest.

"Yes, you did," she assented.

"It has ended in this way. He met her again in London, and again at Brighton, and they are to be married at Christmas. She has given up flirting, and cares for nothing under the sun but her soldier lover."

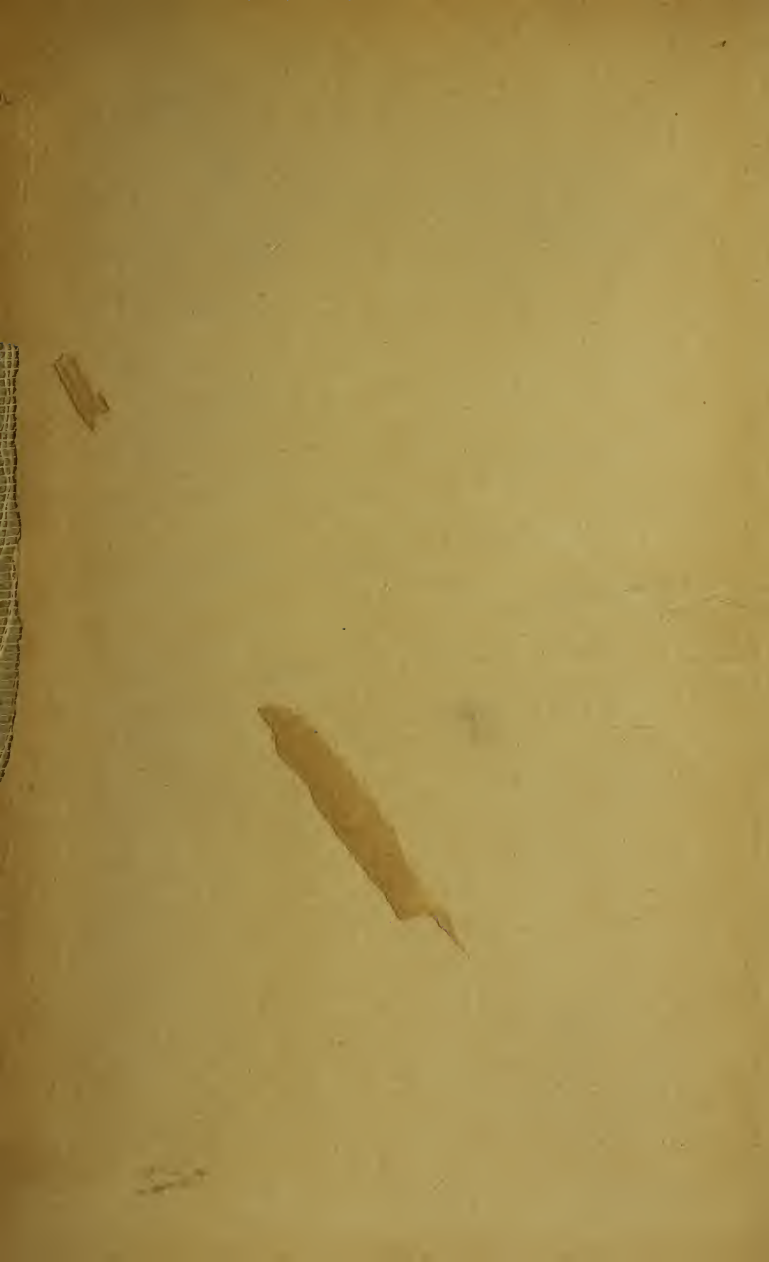
"I am glad of it," said Lady Caraven. "She is a beautiful woman, sweet, gentle, and gracious. Her only fault was coquetry. I think she is safe with Sir Raoul. He will not allow much of that."

"Still you will own that you are surprised, Hildred?"

But she did not answer him. She had placed her hand in his and was looking far away at the light of the setting sun, as one in a happy dream.

"I wanted to say something else to you, my darling," he continued, putting his arm around her and kissing her fondly, while she nestled to his side. "I want to thank you for all you have done for me, and to tell you that I think the greatest blessing heaven can confer upon a man is the gift of a patient, unselfish, devoted wife—such as has been given to me."

THE END



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